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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE



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4

INTRODUCTION

THE TROUBLEMAKER

has finally arrived. Since the arrival of said **troublemaker, Prince Francesco, Zenjirou** has been at his wit's end. A little trouble would normally be fine, but **Prince Carlos** has **fallen ill**. Could this be the **god of pestilence?! Finally**, an unexpected truth about Prince Francesco's bloodline comes to light, and the royal couple come to know **the fate awaiting their child**.



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Prologue — The Journey of the Prince and Princess

The Kingdom of Capua was a huge country that reigned over much of the western reaches of Randlion, most often known simply as the Southern Continent.

The kingdom's location meant that much of the trade in the west was done by sea and the land to the east.

Still, things weren't quite so cut-and-dry, and there was no small amount of trading done by land in the west or vice versa along the rivers in the east. In line with the overall trends, however, the roads in the east had far more time and effort spent on them than those in the west.

Capua was famed for having the best roads on the continent, and one of those roads was currently playing host to two large carriages drawn by drakes. The two young royals within them were from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. Three hundred men from their country's unified army were escorting them, and the party came to a temporary halt on a large plain to the side of the road.

The river flowing nearby suggested that this was an area that had specifically been set aside for rest stops. While it meant a slightly more circuitous route, if they had taken another route, failing to secure water as they traveled, both the travelers and drakes would have eventually run out. Therefore, the more remote roads had been plotted in such a way as to periodically approach water sources throughout the journey, even if it did require detours.

The drakes that had been pulling the carriages had been unhitched and were currently lined up with the knights' mounts, all of them focused entirely on drinking from the river. As their mounts sated their thirst, the knights kept watch over the perimeter. The river could host freshwater drakes, crocodiles, or even carnivorous fish, and the plains might be the hunting grounds of wild drakes.

That said, their surroundings were flat plains as far as the eye could see, with

little cover available. The water was also clear, so spotting anything that might be lurking within would be easy enough. Even the knights on guard duty were relaxed in their own way, stroking their drakes' necks and praising them for their efforts on the road. While there was still a sense of wariness in the air, the overall mood was one of tranquility.

The bigger carriage's door opened, and a figure came into view.

"Phew... Good work, everyone. Aha ha, my shoulders are killing me."

The young man's words and tone were slightly at odds with his status, and he rolled his shoulders as he spoke as if to lend credence to the statement.

"Our apologies for the discomfort, Prince Francesco. We shall remain here for some time while the drakes rehydrate, so if you wish to stretch your legs for a while, please do so."

"Sure thing. You're heading up the itinerary, so just do what you need to," the blond, green-eyed man—eldest son of the first prince of the Sharou family—told the commander with a brilliant smile.

Both his actions and words were in line with what one would expect from a royal, but the somewhat lackadaisical impression he gave off remained. In fact, the lack of excessive nervousness in the soldiers was almost certainly due to his personality in spite of him being the future king's eldest son.

His fine features always had an amiable smile, so he looked younger than his years. Then again, the presence of so many soldiers guaranteeing his safety was simply taken as a fact of life for him, which was perhaps what one would expect from his royal-born status.

Francesco walked around with an utterly relaxed expression as the soldiers watched over him. He stretched out the stiffness from his long hours spent in the carriage.

"Prince Francesco," came a female voice from behind him.

Francesco turned to see a familiar girl. "Hey, Bona," he answered with a smile. "Good to see you out of the carriage as well. The west's a fair bit warmer than the central regions, but it's still refreshing by the water. Come and enjoy the breeze."

“Ah, my thanks for the concern, Prince,” the young woman—Bona—replied with a somewhat surprised nod.

Princess Bona was also of the Sharou royal family. Of course, a lower noble like her, having been inducted into the royal family only because she happened to possess their bloodline magic, could hardly be classified as “a royal” in the same way Francesco (the king’s own grandson) was. Her interactions with him were far less like one royal speaking to another and more like a noble following a royal’s commands.

That difference was shown in numerous ways. While Francesco had an enormous carriage drawn by eight drakes, Bona had a smaller one, pulled by only six. However, while there might have been a clear difference between them, Princess Bona was still a member of the royal family, so she was considerably closer in status to him than the soldiers were. Therefore, it fell to her to question his actions.

“Prince Francesco, pardon my presumption, but were you the one to dress yourself?”

The meaning behind her words should have been obvious, but Francesco displayed no hint of realization as he answered her with a bright smile.

“I did, well spotted. There are fewer maids here than at the palace, so I decided to do what I could to ease their burden.”

He puffed his chest up so much as he spoke that one could practically hear his claims of thoughtfulness and requests for praise. Bona felt tremendously guilty when she saw his expression, but she had to press on. She was the only one present who could directly inform him of a personal problem without causing an issue.

Resolving herself, she cleared her throat before speaking again. “Your Highness, your socks are unmatched,” she told him as frankly as she could.

“Huh? Oh, so they are,” he answered, looking at his feet in surprise. Bona was quite correct. There was a red sock on his right foot and a blue one on his left.

“Ah ha ha, what a blunder. Thanks for telling me, Bona; now I won’t expose my shame,” he said gratefully to the young princess.

“It was an honor. While I would never dare to be presumptuous, perhaps it would be best to return to the carriage and change them?” she suggested, relieved. *It would seem he’s willing to listen*, she thought to herself.

There were some who would grow ill-tempered if they were shamed, even if the statement was correct. It was fortunate for the people around him that Francesco was not so rigid. The prince’s problems lay elsewhere.

“Hm? If I’ve been wearing a red and a blue sock then the others will be in the carriage. So if I go back and change, wouldn’t I end up with a blue sock on my right foot and a red sock on my left?”

The problem...is that he won’t understand what he hears, she lamented, feeling a dull ache around her temples as she listened to the prince—a man who was nearly a decade older than her.

The words of the first prince, Francesco’s father, suddenly came to mind. She had never expected his request to “take care of Francesco” to mean *literally* taking care of him in this way.

This was the Sharou family’s first official visit abroad in over a century. Furthermore, their destination was the Kingdom of Capua, a country that even the Twin Kingdoms didn’t want to face in a direct confrontation. What was the Sharou family thinking, sending the lowest of the low (as far as royals went) with her?

His Majesty and the first prince are both wise people. There must be some reason it needed to be Francesco...

She wished they’d have told her, but that was more than she could hope for as a fringe royal.

If I’d known it would end up like this, I wouldn’t have put my name forward... Actually, no, I’d have hesitated, worried about it, and then put my name forward regardless, she decided, unable to lie to herself.

Her fate had probably been sealed the moment she’d set eyes on the rings that Princess Isabella of the Gilbelle family had brought back from Capua. The three diamonds were perfectly matched in everything from size to shape, all within a setting so finely detailed it made her eyes water.

It was more than enough to draw the attention of someone walking the path of a jeweler. Many of the lower-ranked members of the family strove to become creators of magic tools, so many of them took up jewelling or smithing. Princess Bona was such a person and was seen as a preeminent jeweler despite her young age.

I couldn't enchant either of those rings, but if I could visit the kingdom itself and approach Her Majesty and her husband...

Bona had put her name forward in pursuit of that, an ulterior motive too charming to simply be called ambition. But given the request from the king and his successor to watch over their descendant, she had no other choice but to do all she could to meet those expectations.

"Your Highness, there is no need to change both socks; simply change one or the other to make both feet match."

"Ah, I see! There's that lateral thinking. You've got quite a flexible mind, Bona; nicely done."

"You honor me," she answered after a long pause, fighting against the dull pain assailing her head as she began to regret her decision to come on this journey.



Several days had passed, and Aura was examining miscellaneous documents in her office when a wyvern from the eastern border reached her just as the sun was starting to set.

"Ah, so they've arrived," she murmured after reading the message it carried.

"The delegation from the Twin Kingdoms has reached the eastern border. The delegates are Prince Francesco and Princess Bona. They plan to leave after several days of rest, accompanied by a thousand knights from the fortress as an escort."

She sighed at the missive's contents. She had known about this visit well in advance and was aware that it offered both advantages and disadvantages. Still, considering the gravity of the matter, along with the other burdens she could imagine it bringing, she couldn't help but groan.

Regardless, given her position as the country's queen, she had to do more than that.

"Fabio, how go the preparations for receiving our visitors?" she asked the secretary behind her, remaining seated with her gaze still on the documents.

"They proceed without incident. Three buildings in the south wing of the palace have been prepared and staffed for their use," the slender-faced man replied in his customary even voice.

"Three buildings? Is that sufficient? They are royals from a large country, after all," Aura noted, turning her head to survey the secretary where he stood off to the side as she raised an eyebrow.

"It is. It seems their escort is smaller than we first assumed. The buildings are connected in such a way that to access the first and second, you must pass through the third, so the delegation should have no complaints if we assign the first to Prince Francesco, the second to Princess Bona, and the third to their guards."

"Hmm..."

She felt the need to verify the details and beckoned him closer before continuing her questioning. "What of their armaments? Being knights of the Twin Kingdoms, and directly under the Sharou family at that, I would imagine they all carry magic tools fit for combat."

"Without a doubt. We can, of course, not allow them to roam the palace with magic tools and no restrictions. However, they are charged with protecting two royals with a limited number of people, so I highly doubt they would be willing to surrender their tools if told to do so."

"Perhaps we will treat the buildings they are borrowing extraterritorially, and they will be allowed to be fully armed within them. But while outside of those buildings, they will only be allowed to carry defensive tools that we have verified the functionality of."

The secretary sought confirmation of her suggestion. "Then ordinary weapons would be afforded to them even within the palace, without restrictions?"

"Not entirely, but a certain level of allowance will be required."

“I expect the nobles to dissent.”

“We have no choice. I cannot tell the personal guards of royalty to go completely unarmed,” she answered, another sigh making its way past her lips.

Foreigners armed within the palace, albeit with restrictions... It certainly wasn't a situation she desired, but it would be hard to deny the necessity of it when she considered the future.

Before long, Zenjirou would learn how to use the teleportation spell, and he wished to visit the Twin Kingdoms. If she required Francesco and Bona's guards to divest themselves of their weapons, the same could well be required of Zenjirou's escort when he made his own journey.

Still, allowing uninvited guests absolutely everything they wanted would impinge on Capua's honor. She grumbled as she crossed her legs beneath her slitted dress. Fabio, having spent a considerable amount of time with her, could divine the direction of her thoughts from her expression.

“Perhaps we could levy a fee for each weapon or tool carried? I cannot imagine they would refuse if the matter could be resolved monetarily,” he suggested.

The queen's eyebrows drew closer together as she shook her head. “As tempting as it is, no. I have no wish to set the precedent that weaponry is allowed in the palace in exchange for money.”

“Then perhaps the creation of some form of magic tool. It is a price none but the Twin Kingdoms' royalty can pay, so it should avoid setting any inconvenient precedents.”

“Indeed,” Aura mused. “The question then becomes what type of tool.”

“I imagine you are aware, but while the benefit of a space-time tool would be great, so too would the future risk it represented.”

Using enchantment magic to make a space-time magic tool—magic normally only available to Capuan royalty—would allow outsiders to reproduce those spells. It was true that increasing the number of space-time users in the kingdom would be beneficial to Capua, since Aura was currently the only one capable of using it, but there was also a risk that the magic would fall into

another nation's hands.

“Teleportation is out of the question, and if another spell were to be used, a disposable tool would be safer...”

Having noticed that she'd started counting her chickens before they'd hatched, the queen trailed off and cleared her throat before returning to the main topic.

“Regardless, the specifics will be dealt with once they arrive. Putting lodging and armaments aside, are there sufficient personnel on hand?”

The change of topic was abrupt, but Fabio was used to such things and replied without hesitation. “Yes, we have enlisted young maids from the lower nobility and upper commoners who have sufficient skills to avoid embarrassment in front of our visitors.”

Selecting lower-ranked maids was done out of consideration for the Sharous. The prince and princess would both be bringing a minimal number of their own attendants. The servants on loan from Capua were nothing more than supplementary assistance. If those supplementary staff members were either of higher status or much older than the maids already accompanying their visitors, it would lead to social difficulties.

“Excellent. Enlisting them will not leave their departments short-staffed, will it?”

“It will not; we have a surplus, to an extent, and if it did lead to staffing shortages, we could always temporarily reinstate those who have retired.”

“Very well, then,” Aura decided with a small nod, her concerns addressed for the time being.

There seemed to be no issues with the preliminary preparations. She knew they could well encounter unforeseen problems once the proceedings began in earnest, but anything more was for those on the scene to manage, not something for the monarch to prepare for personally.

Having answered the queen to her satisfaction, it was now her secretary's turn to question her.

“What of Sir Zenjirou in the inner palace? He will have to attend the welcome ceremony at the very least.”

Zenjirou was currently studying etiquette. This past year had seen him gain some level of mastery in dealing with domestic nobles, but they had postponed his lessons on interacting with foreign royals—people of essentially the same social standing as him. Of course, he had started learning about the correct protocols as soon as they had received an unofficial notification of the impending visit, but his understanding of the subject could hardly be called perfect yet.

Aura felt a prickle of guilt at once again sending her husband into the fray with only superficial knowledge. She answered in an oddly even tone, “Lady Octavia says that he has learned enough to serve him well should nothing unforeseen occur.”

Her evasive answer was exactly what Fabio had expected, and the secretary’s mouth twisted slightly. “Oh, I see. There will be no issues as long as nothing unforeseen occurs?”

“Leave it, Fabio,” the queen chided him eventually, but there was no force behind her words. It went without saying.

The Sharou family were breaking their longstanding silence to seek an audience in another country. Zenjirou’s marbles and bloodline were both likely objectives of theirs. The delegates were the current king’s grandson (who still had no place in the line of succession after twenty years, which suggested there was clearly some sort of issue with him) and a young princess of marriageable age.

The circumstances meant that Aura herself had no illusions that there would be “nothing unforeseen” occurring.

Chapter 1 — The Queen, the Prince Consort, the Prince, and the Princess

It was early afternoon, and a strange mood filled the audience room, a place that one might consider the palace's center.

The people in charge of the country's military and civil affairs were arrayed in front of Aura's throne, looks of unease and curiosity on their faces. This was an extremely rare occurrence. The wily nobles here were the movers and shakers of the country to a man. It was rare for them to show concern in their expressions, and even rarer that they were unable to hide their curiosity. To call them careless because of it would be going a step too far, however. After all, they were faced with something that would inevitably heighten their unease and pique their curiosity: the visit of a prince and princess from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.

That idea was enough to make the Capuan nobles lose their composure. If their nation reigned supreme over the west, the Twin Kingdoms did the same over the center of the continent.

Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were of the Sharou family. Unlike the Gilbelles, who frequently visited other countries that wished to make use of their healing powers, the enchanters fundamentally did not go beyond their borders. Official visits had not taken place for at least a century, and a sudden visit from those hidden behind this veil of mystery meant it was hardly surprising that even powerful aristocrats were unable to mask their fascination. Even those nobles who managed to keep the emotion out of their expressions had an irrepressible gleam in their eyes as they looked towards the still-closed double doors.

"I heard the rumors," murmured one noble, "but to think they were actually true..."

"It certainly is a surprise. What could they intend, I wonder?"

“Who knows. The official reason is ‘the deepening of relations.’”

“That is an obvious pretense. And yet...”

“Indeed, things will be chaotic for a while.”

If their quiet conversations as they stood with their heads bowed had reached Aura, she would have surely sighed in relief. There was nothing in their speculations about Zenjirou sharing Sharou blood or the marbles he possessed being ideal objects for enchantment. It seemed, for the moment, that her careful restrictions on the information related to the Sharous’ visit had worked as desired.

As the mutterings continued, the double doors were pushed open with a solemn noise to reveal the forms of a man and woman.

“Oh, that’s them...”

“Prince Francesco and Princess Bona...”

Closely scrutinized by the men and women lining them on either side, the purple-clad royals stepped quietly onto the red carpet. Knights followed behind them, wearing leather armor and bearing swords at their hips. It went without saying that they had been denied offensive magic tools, but they were also forbidden to use their main weapons of war—spears and bows. Their natural gait despite this showed that they were all worthy warriors even with only a single blade at each of their sides.

That was to be expected considering they were guards selected by the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, the country reigning over a significant portion of the continent. The officers present kept their eyes on the knights with a mix of admiration and wariness as the party came to a stop in front of the throne.

Aura remained silent as she surveyed her visitors. *So, this is the prince and princess we’ve been waiting for*, she thought as she watched the energy rising from them. *They certainly have the mana for what we need.*

Princess Bona had slightly less mana than Zenjirou, but Prince Francesco had almost double his companion’s. It was an extreme amount even for a prince of a large country and significantly more than Aura—who prided herself on her large mana reserves even compared to that of other royals—possessed.

Hmm, the mana levels would seem to be in keeping with Prince Francesco being the king's grandson and Princess Bona being further removed. That prompts additional questions, though. Why does he have no place in the line of succession in spite of possessing so much mana?

Francesco had long since matured, seemed visibly healthy, and had extraordinary amounts of mana in addition to being the first prince's eldest son. With all that in mind, it was extremely surprising that he would have no right to the throne.

There must be some problem with his character, then? Her wariness spiking once more, she spoke in a carrying voice without revealing the slightest hint of her thoughts.

"I am Queen Aura of the Kingdom of Capua. You have traveled far, and I welcome your visit. I trust you will make yourselves comfortable."

Such events had specific words and actions ascribed to them, but Francesco's response defied her expectations.

"I am the eldest son of the first prince, Prince Giuseppe. My name is Francesco. My deepest thanks for allowing us to visit your lands."

His fluent speech followed the exact wording expected as he spoke and bowed deeply. Normal royals aside, the crown prince and his eldest son, as "future kings," would never bow in such a way to another country's ruler. Of course, there would naturally be some level of humility in a conversation between prince and monarch, but for him to bow to her that way was unthinkable.

Predictably, the gathered nobles stirred in surprise. In contrast, not one of the knights of the Twin Kingdoms behind the prince showed any reaction.

I see, so this is nothing special for those from the Twin Kingdoms. That would imply this action was not merely a whim of his.

In other words, the kingdom as a whole recognized that Francesco would not be a ruler.

"Likewise, I am Bona of the Sharou family. I am immensely honored to be granted the opportunity to make..."

She continued her introduction, bowing lower than Francesco had, clearly nervous as she spoke, but Aura was only half listening.

What exactly is the reason he has no place in their line of succession? His personality, perhaps? He seems to be able to conduct himself well enough in formal situations like this...

Though her expression didn't flinch in the slightest, Aura's thoughts ran through the possible consequences of the visit and what might happen next.



The general rule for evening events held in the palace was that the higher one's status, the later one arrived. If one was the host, a certain amount of putting on airs was permitted, but if the host was royalty, they were practically required to arrive last of all.

It was, of course, not written into law, so a royal would receive no punishment for arriving earlier, but it would lead to resentment from nobles who had arrived later, so it was best to avoid such a situation where possible.

This evening's event, a welcome party for the Twin Kingdoms' delegation, was being hosted by the royal family. That meant that being both the hosts and royalty, Aura and her husband would have to show up last.

However, this world didn't have mechanical clocks like Earth did, and while they could rely on sundials during the day, all they had during the darker hours were their own biological clocks. This meant that the queen and her husband were to remain in a neighboring waiting room until it was confirmed that everyone who would be in attendance had arrived.

"Ugh, I'm bored..." Zenjirou complained, accidentally revealing his true feelings as he sat on a cushioned sofa.

He had been beside himself with worry when he'd first entered the room, nervous about needing to speak with the foreign royals, but even those nerves had been unable to weather the long wait.

"Guh..." he let out, moving to slump onto the sofa now that he felt more relaxed. Then, remembering what he was wearing, he suddenly sat up straight again. "Whoops, that was close; I could have ruined my outfit."

He was clad in traditional Capuan dress, with a focus on red. While it was less extreme than what he had been required to wear for the Sharous' original welcome a few days earlier, it was by no means comfortable.

"Zenjirou, if you are struggling, why not remove a layer? I imagine it will be some time yet before we are called," Aura suggested from the opposite sofa.

Zenjirou, however, was too fastidious to take her up on the offer. The outfit was rather like traditional Japanese clothing, fastened in front and held in place by a belt, with a waistcoat-like layer on top of it. Pathetic though it may have been, he wasn't sure that he would be able to put it back on properly if he took any of it off, and he didn't want to bother the maids with it when they were already so busy.

"Nah, best not. We might get called any minute," he replied with a shake of his head.

It was boring to wait in silence, but he'd rather not be foolish and invite more trouble. Aware as he was of his poor social skills off the cuff, he wanted to avoid anything he hadn't fully prepared for.

"Still, it is rather dark..." he commented, more for something to say than anything else as he carefully maintained his posture and glared at the oil lamp next to the table.

The ballroom was lit with many candles on chandeliers, so it was quite well illuminated, but the waiting room was far from that. The four oil lamps around the sofas weren't bright by any means. Even his wife, who was only on the opposite couch, was little more than a silhouette, her features unclear.

Suddenly, her face was lit from underneath. Zenjirou realized that she was fiddling with something in her lap as she sat there, and he soon figured out what it was.

"Huh? You brought it here?"

Gripped in her right hand was a portable music player that she was operating with familiar motions. It was one that he'd originally used to fill his time on the train during his commute to work. Recent models were called "smartphones without the phone," but Zenjirou's was nothing fancy. It was tiny, and while it

had a screen and was technically capable of video playback, it was really only ideal for listening to music.

“I did, to stave off the boredom. Would you like to listen too?”

Their year together had left her extremely familiar with its usage, so as she manipulated the player with familiarity, she took an earbud out and patted the space next to her on the sofa.

“Not a bad idea,” he answered. He had more time than he knew what to do with and had no reason to refuse, so he moved next to her and took the free earbud, putting it into his left ear.



The player had a speaker, so they could remove the earphones and listen that way, but they had decided not to be so overt about using his appliances outside of the inner palace. Besides, sitting side by side and enjoying the music together wasn't so bad.

Then an upbeat piano melody came through the earbud.

"Ack, classic piano, huh?" he said in slight disappointment.

The music was from a "fill your bag for a hundred yen" offer at a rental store. The case had something like "Pollini: The Complete Collection" or "Chopin's Nocturnes" written on it, if he remembered right, but he'd tossed out the discs themselves as soon as he'd ripped them to his computer, so he couldn't really remember. The fact that his wife preferred songs he didn't hold much affection for over his favorite pop tracks made him a little sad.

"Indeed. We have music of our own, and I have had countless musicians within the palace, but I have never heard the likes of this 'piano' instrument before. It is a very pleasant sound."

Classical piano music was Aura's favorite from the many types of tunes that Zenjirou had brought with him, and her lips curved into a smile as she spoke. The kingdom's traditional instruments generally fell into the percussion, strings, and woodwinds categories. They had no pitched percussion instruments like glockenspiels or xylophones, which meant the piano solos were a completely new type of sound for her.

Conversely, Zenjirou's favorite bands were *too* alien to her, and she couldn't follow them, so she didn't particularly enjoy the songs. The reasoning might have been even simpler, though, with her merely preferring an instrumental to a song that she didn't understand the lyrics to.

Whatever the case, the music was helpful to pass the time, even if he wasn't fond of the genre.

"You seem to enjoy the piano quite a bit. Actually, I think Zenkichi might be in a better mood when there are classics playing in his room."

Aura caught his mutterings through her free ear and grinned triumphantly. "Indeed, it would appear that Carlos's tastes are similar to my own."

Hmhmhmm.”

Having said her piece, she shot a challenging look his way. Even their usually amiable relationship turned competitive when their son came into the picture.

“Mrgh... No, it’s fine. There are still plenty of my favorites on the computer. The true challenge begins here. I’ve even got ballads,” he declared, his fist tightening on his lap.

“Oh-ho, interesting. Do your best. Regardless, you cannot play him songs in your own language until he has learned ours.”

“Argh, that’s right! No, I can still turn it around after that. Just you wait.”

“Ho ho ho, good luck. Do your best, papa. But when he is five, he will have to leave the inner palace.”

The ban on males in the inner palace made no exceptions for royalty. The only exceptions were the master of the inner palace (the king, or in Zenjirou’s case, the prince consort) and children under five, who were treated as sexless.

“Urgh...”

Their conversation was now full of aggressive statements and combative behavior. Contrary to the content of the exchange, however, there was a distinct impression that they enjoyed the light banter.

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully, “the quicker-paced stuff doesn’t look promising, so I’ll focus on ballads close to a cappellas. Actually, wait a minute, I’m sure I’ve got some instrumental bands too. I can use those right now...”

“So willing to throw down the gauntlet despite knowing it is hopeless. I rather like that.”

They remained shoulder to shoulder, sharing the music and jests as they waited for a maid to fetch them.



“Now announcing Her Majesty Queen Aura and Sir Zenjirou!”

Zenjirou felt the eyes of everyone in the room turn their way as the booming voice called their names. Aware of the gazes on him, he took his wife’s hand

and slowly walked forward.

The hall was lit with several chandeliers that hung from the ceiling, along with tall, evenly spaced candlesticks. The light from each one individually was unreliable, but with so many arranged together, even this huge space could be called brightly lit. Of course, it was by no means as bright as the living room in the inner palace with its LED lamps, but it was far brighter than any of the other rooms he'd been in up to that point.

As the sparkling silver and crystal of the chandelier made him blink, Zenjirou had to give a rueful smile in his mind at his internal lack of response to so much attention being on him.

I guess when you experience it over and over, you get somewhat used to this sort of thing, he thought.

He had been married to Aura for over a year now and had been in quite a number of similar situations. It had been difficult to even walk in a straight line in the beginning, but now he only had a vague sense of being watched.

Becoming excessively used to things could lead to complacency, which was certainly not something he wanted, but he had definitely grown since the time he had been forced to rely on his wife for help with crossing the room.

Uh, so...I need to go talk to the main guests first.

With the warmth of his wife on his arm, he glanced around, looking for someone suitable to greet.

There, perfect.

His targets appeared without him having to search, although given the loud announcement of their entrance, it was hardly surprising that they would come to exchange greetings.

Zenjirou and Aura stopped on the red carpet and awaited the pair approaching them. The blond man looked about the same age as Zenjirou, while the girl had chestnut-brown hair and looked to be in her teens.

The other attendees parted in response to the guests of honor as the pair headed for the queen. Eventually, the two visitors reached them, the man

speaking first on their behalf.

“Greetings, Your Majesties. I offer my deepest thanks for arranging such a wonderful welcome for the two of us.” Upon completing his statement, he gave a bow with such exaggerated movements that it seemed almost theatrical.

“I also wish to offer my thanks, Your Majesties,” the brunette added from a step behind, politely lowering her head.

Their initial audience upon the Sharous’ arrival had allowed them to greet each other several days prior, so this wasn’t their first encounter. However, Zenjirou had essentially watched the affair from his own throne in silence, so this was the first time they were meeting properly.

Being addressed as “Majesty” made him unintentionally flinch, but he saw Aura standing there unresponsive, so he decided to continue his own interaction with them in the same vein. There was no precedent in Capua’s history for a prince consort like Zenjirou, so his title was not definitively either “Majesty” or “Highness.” Thus the domestic nobles all addressed him as “sir” in both official and unofficial contexts. It would be too much to expect foreign dignitaries to be aware of such intricacies in just a few days, however.

“I do hope the both of you enjoy it,” Aura said, prompting Zenjirou to add his own comment.

“There can be no greater honor as one of the organizers of this event than to see both of Your Highnesses enjoy it.” As he spoke, Zenjirou took in the two young royals in front of him.

“We are enjoying it indeed,” answered Francesco. “Though it shames me to admit it, this is my first time going abroad despite my age, so everything is an utterly new experience. All of the food and drink here are things I have never sampled before.”

He was a young man with a sunny voice and expressive, fair features. He was taller than Zenjirou, but not by much as their eyes were roughly level—maybe 175 centimeters. He had a good figure, though, with his limbs and neck being significantly longer than Zenjirou’s, and just the right amount of muscle to draw the eye. Because of that, the formal attire of the Sharou family (a sort of cross between a tuxedo and military dress in a rich purple) didn’t look out of place on

him. If Zenjirou wore it, he would look like someone with too much confidence playing dress-up, but the handsome blond, green-eyed man was more than a match for the outfit.

Hmm, putting it nicely, he's sociable. Putting it less nicely, he seems like a bit of a dandy, Zenjirou decided, allowing Aura to continue the conversation as he turned his attention to Francesco's companion, Princess Bona. His first impression of her was, in a word, "plain," despite its rudeness.

"Indeed, I am honored and humbled to be able to witness the prosperity of Capua with my own eyes," she continued.

The princess remained ramrod straight as she answered briskly, hands lightly clasped in front of her. Her smile was clearly forced, being stiff from the tension she was under. Her dress was a lighter shade of purple than the prince's outfit. It might have been a way of showing her rank as royalty, but in her case, the lighter color actually suited her well. She was slender and had relatively plain features, so she'd have been overshadowed by a richer shade.

She left less of an impression on Zenjirou than Francesco, and the feature that most drew his eye was her hair. It was chestnut in color and reached halfway down her back. None of this was particularly noteworthy, but perhaps in rebellion against that lack of remarkability, she had sprinkled silver powder through it that made her locks sparkle in the light of the chandeliers.

The style in which she wore her hair was also unique. It seemed to be naturally straight, but halfway down, it flared out into a wide wave. While it wasn't as refined as a modern perm, the practice of purposefully curling one's hair was present in this world. Her current style could be seen as merely one variation of the theme, but there were no other women in the room wearing their hair in a similar fashion. Paired with the sparkling silver dust, it led to quite a bit of interest in that particular feature of hers. Given her generally positive reception, some of the nobles present were likely to adopt the look in the future.

Aura had kept the conversation flowing while Zenjirou studied their guests.

"Oh, so both of you have come based on your own desires?" she asked.

"Indeed. You are aware that our family has precious few opportunities to

leave our kingdom, so I took advantage of the opportunity. An unexpected windfall, I suppose, aha ha ha!”

“Prince Francesco, we stand before Queen Aura. Please choose your words more prudently. Our apologies, Your Majesty. The prince’s words are no falsehood, however; this visit is of our own choice and something we have looked forward to.”

The prince showed no signs of concern as he chattered on, the princess growing increasingly flustered as he did and trying to cover for him. Aura was the one handling most of the conversation, but Zenjirou couldn’t remain an observer indefinitely.

“Right, a large part of the reason was also that I wanted to meet you, Your Majesty Zenjirou. It may be presumptuous of me, but you seem rather like myself,” Francesco remarked.

“It is an honor, Prince Francesco. I am also pleased about the chance to speak with you,” Zenjirou replied with a false smile at the almost overly friendly comment.



Approximately an hour later, a red-faced Francesco was singing his heart out in the middle of the hall, the party around him in full swing.

“Ohhhh, life is a joooooyyyy! Siiing to the golden seeeeaaaaa!”



Singing, as well as playing instruments and dancing, were often considered a given talent for a noble, but there was rarely someone who would offer up a solo at a normal party like this. Then again, it was of course possible that, while not the norm in Capua, such performances were commonplace in the Twin Kingdoms.

With that possibility in mind, Zenjirou looked over at the princess and the knights escorting them. He could see the guards exchanging despairing looks or hiding grimaces under their beards. Based on their reactions, he figured the customs of the two countries likely weren't all that different.

"I apologize. His Highness means no harm..." Princess Bona said, seeming to feel responsible for failing to stop her companion as she cringed pitifully, the apology far from the first she had offered.

"You need not worry so much; he is causing no trouble," Zenjirou assured her with a forced smile, unable to avoid feeling somewhat guilty about her state.

At some point, Francesco had shed his purple jacket and started singing joyously, but his reddened cheeks made it clear that he was quite drunk, undoubtedly due to how many cocktails he had consumed that had used Zenjirou's distilled spirits in the drink.

The fruit liqueurs that the southern continent favored were around ten percent alcohol, but drinking cocktails based on distilled spirits at the same pace would obviously have a much stronger and faster effect.

I did warn him it was pretty strong stuff, but I guess it's hard to tell until you've actually had some.

"A ballad of loooooove! To the silver moooooonn!"

The prince, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself. Zenjirou felt a little bad for Bona as she trembled with nowhere to hide, but the cheerful singing made it feel almost like a victory. In truth, now that the other attendees were somewhat over their initial surprise, most wore affable smiles as they stood around the guest of honor from a respectful distance.

On top of that, Zenjirou could hear some sort of accompaniment playing along with the prince's singing.

Huh? He looked around for the source. What he found was a group of men and women wearing traditional dress, playing instruments. *Oh, the palace musicians. Right, Aura must have arranged that.*

He remembered that when Francesco had first started belting out his song, the queen had called over an attendant and given them instructions. One person singing on their own could get out of hand, but with musical backing, it became a form of entertainment. Of course, there was no hiding the fact that Francesco had let himself go, but by having her musicians accompany him, it showed that Aura, as the host, had allowed it.

The nobles in the hall had quickly picked up on her intention, and the air of confusion had been swept away and replaced by an honest enjoyment of and applause for the foreign prince's antics.

"Prince Francesco," Zenjirou said to Bona, pausing ever so slightly, "certainly does not lack confidence."

"I-Indeed, um... Thank you."

She was evidently relieved by the care that Zenjirou had taken in choosing his description, but her smile remained strained with an apologetic air.

"Zenjirou," Aura prompted, conveying with a glance that she would go and support their jovial visitor.

"Got it," he answered, indicating that he would deal with the princess. He watched his love glide away before turning back to Bona. "Princess Bona," he said, signaling a maid as he did, "would you perhaps care for a drink?"

The maid caught his gesture and quickly came over with a silver tray of drinks in hand, offering its contents respectfully to the princess.

"Ah, I would. My thanks."

Bona took the proffered silver cup and took a cautious sip. The vessel contained a fairly prevalent sweet wine. Zenjirou would hardly offer the spirit-based cocktails to her during their first meeting, especially after it had ended so badly for the prince.

"Phew..." she sighed.

The drink, or possibly the slight amount of alcohol within, had an immediate effect, her nerves abating somewhat as she spared the prince another look.

“Ohhhh, the fair capitaaaaal! Jewel of the saands, its naaaaame!” he sang.

Francesco, with the backing of the palace musicians, barreled into his second song. The country’s current king and heir to the throne had appointed Bona to the role of caretaker, which meant that this was a burden for her, but Aura had provided a stage, so there was now no room to interfere. The one saving grace was that Aura and the surrounding nobles were clearly going to keep it from becoming an issue, yet that in itself made her feel helpless as a caretaker, and rather pathetic too.

That said, continuing to observe the situation would only exhaust her mentally, so she pulled her attention fully away from the prince for the first time that night. It was that action that allowed her to notice the mana-wreathed ring on Zenjirou’s left hand as he held his own goblet.

“Your Majesty, that ring!” she began, her demeanor changing as she leaned forward to examine it.

“Ah, yes, the ring that your family enchanted for me,” he said, shifting his cup to the other hand and holding his left up to her face for her to see.

Anyone with the ability to view mana could see that the ring had its own aura, separate from Zenjirou’s. The wedding bands that he and Aura had were finely detailed and would draw a lot of attention, so they didn’t wear them outside of the inner palace, but tonight was, of course, an exception. Francesco himself had been the one to enchant it, so failing to wear it to the evening’s event would be rude.

Considering the prince’s extravagant nature, however, it was probably an unnecessary concern. Regardless, it had broken the ice with Bona, and Zenjirou could see it working as a conversation topic, so he continued.

“I believe it was Prince Francesco who enchanted the ring, was it not?”

“It was. His Highness is one of the foremost users of enchantment magic in the family. I offered my own abilities but was not chosen for the task. Though I have a fair amount of confidence when it comes to creating a new object, I lack

the mana to enchant something that already exists,” she admitted with a self-deprecating smile.

Seeing the mana rising from her body, Zenjirou noted that she did have a rather small amount for a royal—certainly less than Zenjirou himself, and he was already on the lower end when it came to the mana capacity of royals. So her mana pool was probably minimal. It appeared that the comments about lower levels of bloodline magic as a result of skipping generations were true.

And Francesco is much more what I’d expect in that regard, maybe even more than what Aura has, he mused with a brief glance at the blond prince as the performers launched into their third song.

The young man was wrapped in a vast amount of mana, quite suitable for a direct royal descendant. Aura had nothing to be ashamed of in terms of her own mana capacity, but Francesco possessed even more, to the extent that it was visible at a glance. If Zenjirou were to compare the two foreign dignitaries, he would say that the prince had *easily* double that of the princess.

Whoa, that might be about as much as Zenkichi. Hiding his thoughts, he shifted his attention from the prince back to Bona.

“I see, so you specialize in crafting? I’ve heard the Twin Kingdoms’ jewelry is among the finest on the continent.”

“Indeed. My skills still require refinement, of course, but I have more confidence in my crafting than in my magic,” she confirmed with a nod, her expression belying more conviction than her words would suggest.

For such a diligent—some might say, reserved—princess to specifically mention her skills, she was likely a fully-fledged craftswoman despite her youth. It was at the very least clear that she was far more passionate about jewelry than the average person.

“Princess Isabella showed it to me once. It is something you brought from your home country, is it not, Your Majesty?” Although she maintained her manners, the ardent gaze that she directed towards his ring seemed almost dangerous. It was the kind of look one might call “hungry.”

While Zenjirou stalled mentally, faced with a far greater level of zeal than he

had expected, he managed to keep a smile on his face, and then answered. “That is correct. It is a custom in my homeland that when a couple is to marry, the man gives the woman a ring and dons a matching one himself.”

Despite the simple explanation, Bona let it pass without comment, interested solely in the object itself.

“Oh, then such rings are common in your homeland? With diamonds cut to sparkle with so many facets, three of them the exact same size and even shape...”

“Th-They are. They are by no means cheap, but I wouldn’t refute the claim that they are common.”

“In that case, are you aware of how they created these jewels? Gold is easy to work with, but I cannot fathom how one would shape it so finely, with no blemishes. If you know the process, I would be greatly appreciative if you would tell me.”

The alcohol likely had some influence on her open enthusiasm, but considering her earlier reticence, this complete emotional reversal showed just how passionate she was about the art.

“Ah, my deepest apologies, but I lack any such knowledge.”

“Completely? You do not know even the smallest amount on the subject? I do not mind how inconsequential it is.”

“I do not entirely know what to tell you. Unfortunately, it is far from my specialty. All I have is a smattering of basic knowledge, more likely to hinder than help.”

“That is no matter. It may still be of some use.”

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his surprise at her pleas and the complete one-eighty from her earlier demeanor. *Well, I guess I was well off with my first impression. Is she a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Actually, no, it feels more like she’s just a different person as far as jewelry is concerned; maybe that’s it?*

Truthfully, he was quite fond of people who got that excited about their hobbies. “Very well, then,” he said eventually. “Should the opportunity arise,

we will discuss it.”

“Thank you so much!”

The conversation ended there as her persistence overwhelmed him enough to extract what could well be called a promise.



Zenjirou and Aura, having washed off the sweat, dirt, and perfumed oils from the evening, were spending what remained of their time before bed in their room with the air conditioner on.

“Ahh, I’m so tired. I really wish we’d been able to see Zenkichi before bed, though,” Zenjirou lamented.

Aura gave a slight chuckle before answering. “That is simply how it must be. It would inconvenience his wet-nurse and the maid if we visited at this time of night. If we enter, we will need to awaken them.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh, understanding the reasoning but still saddened by it as he leaned back.

The two were seated in wooden chairs in the corner of the room. As soon as the air conditioner had been set up, Aura had had a small (at least by royal sensibilities) table and two chairs brought into the room. Following that, two of the lamps had been moved from the bedside to that same corner. Since then, not only had their evening relaxation taken place in the bedroom, but also most of their breakfasts and lunches...when they were actually able to eat in the inner palace.

This would probably continue until the hottest months had passed. The current season saw temperatures well above body temperature, even at night, so of course, anyone aware of the air conditioner’s existence would be unable to escape its charms.

Zenjirou gulped down a glass of ice water and returned the empty cup to the table with a sigh. His usual drink after a bath had been the low-malt beer from Japan, but that was all finished now. He’d started off drinking it sparingly, but the taste had begun to change as time went by, so he’d ended up consuming it all before it went bad.

Seeing that he was done, Aura folded her hands and placed them on the table before speaking. "Let us begin, then. We have an early start, so we can ill afford to waste time. Zenjirou, what are your opinions of the prince and princess? Your pure impressions, anything that bothered you, and whatever else comes to mind."

"Right, well, hmm..." he replied with a nod, thinking back on the events of the night and choosing his words carefully.

"Let's start with my first impression of Prince Francesco," he decided. "It probably goes without saying, but he's a carefree moron if there is no deeper meaning to his actions."

"Indeed."

Aura could only nod with a reluctant smile at his assessment of the man's character. "Lacking in wisdom" was certainly an apt description of the prince based on his actions that evening. The event they had hosted may have allowed for a little impropriety as a rule, but drinking so much that he lost his sense along with starting to sing loudly was not something an aristocrat should have done. Those actions, were they not simply an affectation, would explain why he still lacked a position in the line of succession despite being twenty-four years old.

However, Zenjirou's face grew uncertain as he continued. "If that's true, though, the lack of unhappiness there bothers me. If that's how he was to begin with, he wouldn't have such a guileless and silly personality."

"Oh, I see. You find it strange?"

"If you think about it, if the prince had a personality where he was really so lighthearted and irresponsible, he'd have been subjected to constant disapproval in the palace from a young age. 'Cause he'd have betrayed the expectations they would have had for the descendant of the crown prince. Would anyone brought up in such an environment really be that carefree and unaware of it?"

Zenjirou was of the opinion that the environment a person grew up in had a huge influence on their personality, and Aura had no dissenting views on the matter. It was too unilateral for her to agree in full, though.

“I have only heard rumors, but his parents, Prince Giuseppe and his wife, are both spoken of as outstanding people. If they brought him up with love, is it not possible for him to have ended up...*straightforward*, to a certain extent?”

Her rebuttal was something that Zenjirou could agree with. “Yeah, that seems likely. Plus I heard from Princess Bona that he’s one of the most gifted royals with enchantment magic. Having that trait of refusing to back down is a big part of it. I don’t think it’s unlikely that it’s his true personality; there just wasn’t enough of a sense of dissonance for it to be an act. That still leaves questions, though. Why would the Sharou family break their isolation of decades to allow an amiable idiot to visit us?”

“Maybe it isn’t as important to them as we think? Perhaps they simply used the process of elimination to send the prince, who has no place in the line of succession, along with a princess who barely holds the title,” Aura suggested, more to get her husband’s thought process than to actually offer her opinion.

His reaction was precisely what she expected. “Definitely not. I mean, he’s one of their strongest enchanters, right? He’s at least useful for making magic tools, so there would need to be *some* benefit to his absence, otherwise it doesn’t make sense.”

Their opinions were much the same, and her expression relaxed slightly. The fact that their thoughts were aligned, even when faced with this difficulty, was something to celebrate.

“So, if there is no further depth to Prince Francesco’s personality, there certainly is to his selection. Whatever the case may be, it will be dangerous to proceed based on official information.”

“Yup, I’d say that,” Zenjirou agreed.

Either way, this was only Zenjirou’s first interaction with the man, and he didn’t consider himself perceptive enough to get a full understanding of their guest from a single meeting after exchanging a few words.

It was much the same for Aura, although to a slightly lesser extent. “Very well, then let us take a reactionary approach to the prince for now,” she decided, shifting her focus to the other royal. “And what of Princess Bona?”

“Well, I’d say my first impression is that she’s a diligent hard worker? I’m pretty sure that’s accurate. It looks like she’s here as some sort of chaperone, and she was almost painfully tense the whole time.”

The comparison wouldn’t mean anything to Aura, but his impression was that Bona was “a weak-willed but diligent class representative.” Someone who got good grades and was popular with the teachers, which resulted in her having the role foisted upon her. A girl who wasn’t sociable and lacked the strength to pull the class together, but was also all too serious and therefore couldn’t just let the responsibility go, doing her best until she was on the verge of tears. That was the image he had of her.

“Indeed, she was constantly nervous and watching Prince Francesco. She seemed much more animated when speaking with you, though.”

“Yeah, although she was pretty tense at the start with constant apologies and the like. But as soon as she noticed the ring, she really opened up,” he answered as a grimace made its way onto his face at the memory of their conversation. “It was like it was the most important thing in her life. She was so into it, it kind of took me by surprise.”

“The ring? Oh, your wedding ring? That is hardly surprising.”

Her immediate understanding was a shock to him.

“Hardly surprising?”

Aura nodded easily. “Indeed, the Sharou family made their success by creating magic tools. The men forge weapons and armor, and the women fashion decorative items as a rule. It is only natural that her demeanor would change upon seeing the ring,” she explained casually.

The three diamonds set in gold, when viewed by someone with a discerning eye, shone shockingly brightly. If the observer was a specialist like Bona, they would also know that the fine details and the uniformity of the stones were utterly irreplicable in this world.

“Hmm, but it didn’t feel like it was because it was her job, more like she was totally overcome by passion. She was asking repeatedly to see it, to talk about how it was made even once. She wore me down in the end, and I ended up

promising to tell her about it if there's a chance."

As he scratched his head, Aura's face creased into a frown for the first time that night before she reprimanded him. "Zenjirou, that was rather rash. It sounds like you avoided promising any specific date or conditions, but take care when saying things that might be construed as a commitment."

"Sorry," he said with a rueful shrug at her rare remonstration, "it's just that she's a princess from a large kingdom, at least technically, so it ended up happening while I was trying to avoid being rude. How do we deal with that? I didn't specifically promise anything, so if it comes to it, I can probably play dumb."

"Hmm," Aura mused, resting her chin in her hand. *The promise itself isn't the issue. After all, it was made on a night of merriment, so I doubt even she expects it to be upheld. We can certainly play it off. The problem is that this is the first time he has erred in this way.*

If the mistake was simply due to him growing used to the environment, that was fine. His meek expression made it obvious that he would recenter himself and not make the same kind of mistake for some time. It would be another matter, however, if it was due to any compatibility he felt with the princess. Another way to put it would be that if he simply found it easy to talk with her, or if his wariness waned without reason around her. Aura may have been overthinking things, but they had seemed too close for a first meeting.

Zenjirou is usually careful and reserved. Thus far he has managed to maintain an appropriate distance with Lady Octavia. With Fatima too, even as she pursues him. In comparison, Bona had wrangled a promise to meet again from their first real conversation. It is no issue if it is simply my own imagination or jealousy, but if not, this could become bothersome.

Aura was aware that she had few pleasant emotions when it came to women approaching her husband, and she couldn't definitively say that jealousy was playing no role in her judgment. She decided to avoid interfering for the moment.

"Very well, she certainly is hard to be too unkind towards. Take care in the future. Now then, shall we leave things there and retire for the night?"

Her question prompted him to check the time on his phone where it lay on the table before rising from the chair and walking to his wife's side.

"I didn't realize it was so late. Let's."

He offered his hand without thinking about it.

"Indeed," she answered, taking it and standing as well.

They remained hand in hand as they approached the bed, but Zenjirou suddenly had a thought and stopped.

"Oh? What is wrong?" Aura asked in puzzlement.

He scratched his head with his free hand as he answered vaguely, "I mean, it's nothing big, I just thought the situation suited taking you to bed in a princess carry."

"A princess carry?"

"Yeah, well, how do I describe it? I put my arm under your knees and behind your back and carry you. It's called a 'princess carry' in my country."

"I see," she said, thinking over the explanation for a moment before a grin spread across her face. "Hmm, then you should leave that to me. I have been somewhat stiff recently, so I am not yet confident in it. But I believe that with a little training, I can give you your princess carry."

"Huh? A role reversal?! That's less something to yearn for and more painful! Hang on, you know that, don't you?!"

Halfway through his protest, he noticed her teasing grin and finished off his reply with an exaggerated expression of distress. For a man from this world, such a suggestion, no matter how good-natured, would have ended in anger. The norm here was for the dominance and strength of a man to be extolled. This past year had taught Aura that Zenjirou wouldn't be hurt by some teasing on that level, so she couldn't help but play a joke. One might call it a type of flirting.

"C'mon, let's get to bed," he said, reacting much as she had expected, lightly tapping her on the head with his empty hand and keeping his other tightly gripping hers.

“Ow, ha ha, very well,” she answered sweetly, pulling her arms around his own to make it sink into her cleavage as she rested her head on his shoulder.

The two of them fell silent as they moved practically as one to the bed.

Intermission 1 — The Hero and the Youth

While the visitors from the Twin Kingdoms were being received at the palace, the third son of Margrave Gaziel—and next in line for the title—Xavier Gaziel was meeting with General Pujol Guillén in a fortress on the southern edge of Capua’s royal territory.

The skylight was small, and the thick-walled fortress was dimly lit even at noon, but it was commensurately cooler than the average local home. Xavier, however, could feel a cold sweat rolling down his back, robbing him of the composure to enjoy the lower temperature as he held himself as straight as possible, hands crossed behind him.

This is General Pujol, one of the heroes of the war! He thought to himself as he looked reverently up at the older man. The general, at nearly two meters in height, was tall enough compared to Xavier (165 centimeters tall) that it was a case of quite literally looking up to the veteran as well.

On top of that, Xavier was confident in his martial prowess for his age, but even simply standing there, Pujol seemed to exude a cast-iron faith that no one could measure up to him. The young heir was reporting to a man well above him as a noble, as a warrior, and in military rank. He couldn’t even swallow his spit given how dry his mouth was and how nervous he felt as the fellow in front of him spoke consideringly.

“Oh, so Lord Xavier, you mean to say that the extermination should not be taken over by myself but rather completed by your own hand?”

While Pujol’s voice was low and not loud in the slightest, Xavier needed to focus on his weakening legs before replying. “No, General. I know my place! The moment I requested aid from the royal army, I accepted that my mission was a failure. What I wish is for me and the hundred men under my command to accompany you on your expedition.”

“Oh?”

The word was the same as his last statement, but the intonation was completely different. It held a note of admiration, as if he had reconsidered the young man in front of him.

“Hmm.” Pujol remained composed as he considered Xavier’s reply before nodding shortly and speaking again. “Lord Xavier, there is a strong possibility that this campaign will be protracted. The raptor you observed was massive, and the hunters all say that their physique and intelligence increases with age. If that is true, it will be no easy opponent.”

“Ah, yes, I quite agree,” Xavier answered despite his confusion at the sudden change in tone.

Of course, the general was quite right. If the leader of the raptors could grasp differences in firepower, it might not even make its presence known in front of General Pujol’s Drake Marksmen Knights, which would mean they would need to hunt the swarm through the mountains. Excepting good luck or successfully trapping the alpha beast, such an excursion would inevitably lead to a drawn-out campaign.

“However, that makes the salt supplies for the territory an issue. I believe reserves are likely to last for three months at present?”

Understanding the implications, Xavier nodded with a somber expression. “Correct. Rationing could extend that to half a year, but it would lead to greater unrest and have an adverse effect on the cost of living. I would rather avoid that.”

It seemed to be exactly what the general wished to hear, and he nodded without changing his expression. “To avoid that, I have had a large amount of salt delivered to the fortress. Of course, both protecting the salt and eliminating the wyverns is impossible. Therefore, my original plan was to immediately return and transport the salt after a successful defeat of our enemy. The addition of your men would change the equation, however. If we can entrust the transport and protection of the salt to you, I believe we could force our way through and deliver the reserves first. Naturally, if we are not blessed with an encounter to eradicate the swarm during the journey there, I would have you and your men remain on the front line afterwards. What do you think?”

Ah, that's how it connects, Xavier thought. Essentially, if they were there as guards for the salt, the general would bring Xavier and his army along. If the general is right and we are attacked en route, we will have no chance to fight. If not, he will allow me to stand on the front line and gain recognition.

Also, as the next in line to his father's position, Xavier would wholeheartedly approve anything that would get his lands the salt they needed faster. Overall, he had no reason to refuse.

"Understood, General Pujol, you can leave that duty to us. My thanks for prioritizing the delivery of salt to our lands, and allow me to offer thanks on behalf of the margrave as well."

"Do not concern yourself; this is my duty," the general answered, smiling for the first time that day.

Chapter 2 — Manipulator and Manipulatee

Ten days had passed since Prince Francesco and Princess Bona had arrived. In that time, the palace had grown used to their presence to a certain extent. That was the case for not only the hosts but all of Capua and the foreign delegation as well.

Naturally, it wasn't perfect. The building's architecture was completely different from the Sharous' home. The maids, while sufficient in number, did things differently to a certain degree. The chefs the royals had brought with them prepared their food, although the results were slightly different due to the use of local ingredients.

Ten days was far too short of a time to grow accustomed to these fundamental differences in culture. If anything, the homesickness-causing differences grew ever more prominent as the days passed, so the prince and princess's time in Capua could end up being a bit uncomfortable.

However, there were always the rare few who could spend an age in an alien culture without the slightest pangs. Fortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Francesco was one of them.

"Prince Francesco, these are clothes using the new style of button that I mentioned previously. They are unfortunately just a sample, so they may not be precisely sized to you, but I can create a set with the same design and fabric if you would like to order it."

Francesco had summoned a merchant to a room in a building on the south side of the palace that the delegation was borrowing, and he was currently enjoying shopping. The fabrics and clothes that the merchant had brought packed the room, lit by the sunlight streaming in through the wide-open shutters.

As the merchant had explained, the items on display were strictly samples, and unlike a modern boutique, he did not have multiple versions of each item in different sizes. So the clothes being presented were all manner of style.

“Right. Still, it is interesting. The clothing originates from the Northern Continent just as ours does back home, yet these are completely different from in my own country. Intriguing, truly intriguing,” Francesco mused, his eyes sparkling as he weaved between the spread-out wares.



Clothing similar to western fashion came from the Northern Continent, so the base components were much the same between Capua and the Twin Kingdoms despite one being in the west and the other being located at the center of the Southern Continent. However, local cultural practices had an influence, and they had diverged in style over time.

“Right, then I’ll take three sets. One with these new ‘four-holed buttons’ and one with what you called ‘the most common in Capua.’ For the final one, I’ll leave it up to your discretion. Bring a set that will fit me well.”

“Aha, very well! I shall do my utmost to produce three sets of clothing worthy of your favor,” the merchant replied excitedly, falling down and not bothering to hide his joy at having secured a client as important as a foreign prince.

In contrast, the knights against the wall had sour looks on their faces. Their charge was in another country buying new clothes, an activity that caused those responsible for his security no small amount of bother.

A tailor was generally considered to be fourth in terms of professions that would allow an assassination if the person won the target over. The highest-risk professional was a doctor (by quite some margin), followed by a cook, and then a hairdresser.

Tailoring clothes inevitably required contact between the tailor and the client, and the tailor would need to be allowed to approach the other with needles to hem up the clothes. It wasn’t as much of an issue as with a hairdresser, who would stand behind the target for a long period with scissors and razors in hand, but it was certainly an occupation that could allow for such opportunities.

That meant that knowing a tailor’s background and personality was more important than the professional’s skill with a needle and thread. For their prince to enlist the services of a tailor in a far-off country, and one employed by the royalty of that country to boot, was nothing short of preposterous to the knights.

Regardless, in spite of suppressing bitter looks, they showed no sign of interfering with Francesco’s actions. The expressions on their faces suggested they had already given up on moderating his behavior.

That said, allowing the fitting to proceed did not mean they could abandon their duties. They had taken all possible precautions, having prepared the needles and checked each piece of fabric before it was placed near the prince, in addition to having sought assurances from Capua as to the merchants' and tailors' backgrounds.

Of course, all of that still didn't completely remove the risk, and the responsibility would fall on them in the unlikely event that anything should happen.

"Sure, I'll look forward to it. I'll help as much as I can with any adjustments, so if you need to, don't hesitate to visit."

"Thank you very much, Your Highness. I shall devote all my skill to this."

The knights against the wall held back grimaces and sighs, among other things, as the prince gave another bothersome promise with one of his usual innocent smiles.



Without a doubt, the person whose schedule had become busier than ever since the foreign royals' arrival was Zenjirou. Of course, that was in relative terms, comparing his daily business before and after their arrival. He was by no means the busiest person in the palace.

Up until then, he had attended functions as Aura's proxy, but having days that were completely free was not a rarity. That lifestyle had changed entirely after Prince Francesco and Princess Bona's arrival. After all, they were a prince and princess from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle; it required a certain level of status to play host.

Aside from the queen, Zenjirou was the only royal of age within the kingdom. Aura could not abandon her regular responsibilities, so it was natural for him to be tasked with interacting with their guests.

"Sir Zenjirou," came Fabio's even voice from across the room, "it is time for the audience with Prince Francesco that I informed you of this morning. He has already arrived in the waiting room; shall I show him in?"

The room had recently become both Zenjirou's office and his audience

chamber.

“Please do,” he replied with a nod as he met the blank gaze of Aura’s secretary.

He adjusted himself on the sofa. He’d have loved nothing more than to sprawl out and let out a deep sigh, but he couldn’t show such carelessness in front of his wife’s confidant, who was always all too eager to speak up about his faults.

Aura was entirely right: Fabio was talented and well-acquainted with the workings of the palace, but that was no reason to be fond of a man who would interject with sarcastic and cynical warnings for each mistake Zenjirou made.

Conversely, it was vexing that he had confidence that following the older man’s advice would steer him safely through the minefield of Capuan politics. Fabio was wont to speak with hidden meanings and test Zenjirou subtly, but he would never be so foolish as to do so where it could cause issues or shame him in front of others.

“I shall bring him directly; please wait a few moments.”

Fabio left the room. Approximately ten minutes later, Francesco was seated on the sofa across from the prince consort.

“I see you are more used to the country now. I am glad to hear that,” Zenjirou told him.

“Indeed, the temperature and food aren’t all that different from my own, after all, aha ha ha!” the blond answered, flashing a bright smile with seemingly nothing behind it in contrast to Zenjirou’s own false grin.

However, the prince’s words didn’t quite jibe with the idea of an objective perspective. While Capua was hot and humid with dense forests, the Twin Kingdoms had deserts, so even though they had similar temperatures, the humidity there was much lower, and the feel of the climate was nothing like Capua’s.

Naturally, this led to a difference in the vegetation and animals endemic to the region, which in turn resulted in a difference in the eating habits of the people living there. The staple foods in both countries were lightly fried bread, soups with plenty of spices, and grilled meats, so they were similar on a

superficial level. Yet if one were to examine things closely, the specific details of the foods' preparation were quite different, from the flour used in the breads to the types of spices in the soups. It would be akin to tactlessly lumping French and British cuisine into a single category of "western food."

That said, it's entirely possible he's being serious, considering his personality, Zenjirou thought with a mental grimace, having gotten a rough estimation of the prince's character over the past few days.

The young man's actions were inscrutable. He seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve with everything he said and did, and there were often inconsistencies in his actions and words. Whether that was simply his character or a well-constructed facade, taking it too seriously would prove detrimental to Zenjirou's health.

Regardless, the topic moving to food and drink was a fortunate development as it allowed Zenjirou to employ his prepared statement.

"That reminds me... You seemed rather fond of our distilled spirits the other evening. Would you accept a bottle?"

The question caused the prince's eyes to gleam as he leaned forward with interest. "Really?! My thanks, Your Majesty!"

It had worked better than Zenjirou had expected, and he had to turn away slightly as he addressed Fabio.

"Y-Yes, really. Fabio, bring it, please."

"At once, sir."

Zenjirou watched the secretary out of the corner of his eye as the man bowed and left the room. He had intended to pass the time waiting in silence, but that hope was soon shattered.

"Ahh, I'm so looking forward to this. Really, thank you so much. It was the first time I ever had such strong alcohol, and I fear I may be stuck with it! I always liked a drink, but that was on another level. I hear it can be mixed with many things as well? There are various ideas I want to try out."

The young man across from him seemed incapable of abiding even a brief

period of silence and immediately began chattering away cheerily. Not allowing Zenjirou to get a word in was somewhat ill-mannered when it came to a conversation between equals, but there would be no end to it if he pointed out every little breach in Francesco's etiquette.

"Then it is well worth giving it to you as a gift if you are so fond of it," he answered with his own feigned smile just as Fabio returned.

"Here, Sir Zenjirou," said the secretary, placing a bottle covered in red cloth in front of him without ado.

"Good work." Zenjirou reached for the cloth and loosened the knot, laying the contents bare.

"Whoa!"

Francesco's loud exclamation was no exaggeration this time. Even the stone-carved expressions of the knights guarding him broke as they showed genuine surprise.

The bottle was rectangular, colorless, and completely clear. It had a square base and was tall, made of thick and transparent glass. The whole thing had a tortoiseshell-like pattern embossed onto it, so it shone like a jewel in the light from the window.

The bottle had originally contained an amber whiskey, but it was now filled with one of Zenjirou's almost colorless spirits, making the transparency clear at a glance. The Southern Continent had no glass manufacturing, so the container was more a work of art than just something to hold the drink in.

"Wonderful! I can take it as it is?! You do not want this container returned when I have finished with it?"

"I do not; please keep it," Zenjirou answered with a shake of his head in the face of the prince's almost desperate response. He rewrapped the bottle and leaned forward, placing it in front of Francesco. "I would caution you to be careful, though; the container is far more susceptible to impacts than those of wood or metal would be. It will easily shatter if dropped from a height and could break from simply falling over if it is on a hard surface," he warned, paying close attention to the other man's reaction.

The gift was not solely Zenjirou's decision, but a choice made after a conversation with Aura the night before. The people of the Twin Kingdoms had been enamored with the marbles but nowhere near as interested in the beads he had brought from Earth. What, then, would they make of a glass bottle?

The couple had decided on this one to try to gauge their reaction, but the results were at once more than they had expected and less than they had hoped for.

"Truly, this is incredible. How was it made? I have never seen such a faultless crystal. To say nothing of one being formed into such a shape without a single hint of distortion!"

The prince's expression was one of almost childlike joy as he rejoiced in an exaggerated manner, but Zenjirou couldn't tell if that joy was due to an artistic appreciation on Francesco's part or a reaction to seeing materials that would prove immensely useful in creating magic tools.

Damn it. I just can't tell. I should have had Aura here or set the camera up to record this, he lamented, but he was all too aware of how difficult that would have been. Who knew how long it would take for Aura to be available given the duties dogging her as the country's queen? And he couldn't think of a way to take a recording without it seeming suspicious.

The bottle would merely have been trash in Japan, but it was one of the very few whiskey bottles he had brought, and surrendering it without recompense didn't sit well with him. Francesco seemed to recognize Zenjirou's concern.

"I can hardly accept such a wondrous item and give you nothing in return. What do you say to a magic tool as a thank-you?" he offered, suggesting the best that Zenjirou could have hoped for. It was a blessing that Francesco had brought up the topic himself.

"That is an attractive proposition," he answered, once more keeping an eye on his guest's reactions. "I have heard that their creation takes an exceedingly long time. Are you sure it is possible? I seem to remember that you already have an obligation to create another item during your stay, after all."

As payment for their lodging, and for allowing their guards to remain partially armed, Francesco and Bona would each be creating a magic tool and presenting

them to Capua. The process of making a simple magic tool took months, and something involving bloodline magic could take years. Inevitably, that meant Francesco's "private thanks" for the whiskey bottle would be provided several years later.

"Yes, that's true. Hmmm, what to do? One of those transparent jewels would allow me to solve it..."

Zenjirou honestly wanted to praise himself for not reacting unduly to the almost inner monologue that the statement faded into.

Is he for real?! he thought. Isn't that, like, a state secret?

Clear spheres allowed enchantments to be done in a much shorter time—at least, so went the rumor, but that was all it was: a rumor with little credibility.

Aura was near-certain that it was true due to the contents of her correspondence with the other kingdom, but there was no proof as of yet. It was entirely unexpected that a member of the Twin Kingdoms' royalty would provide proof so quickly, and even more so that it would be an open admission. Was the prince genuinely an idiot?

As the all-too-convenient thought passed through his mind, a voice interrupted his musings.

"Excuse me, Sir Zenjirou," said a guard standing by the door.

Zenjirou offered a brief apology to the prince before addressing the guard. "What is it?"

"Sir, Princess Bona has arrived. May I escort her in?"

The question finally made Zenjirou realize, albeit a bit late, that Bona wasn't with them, and he now wondered why that was. The audience had been requested under Francesco's name, and his alone, so it hadn't felt strange for him to be the only one present. Yet their interactions the other evening had made it clear that Bona was there to supervise her companion. Would she, as diligent as she appeared to be, allow such a risky endeavor? A prince that they treated like a problem child meeting a foreign aristocrat on his own?

"Prince Francesco?" Zenjirou said questioningly, having half-seen where this

was going.

“Well, I thought it seemed a shame to always make her accompany me. She deserves some time to herself, so I came without informing her. Man, though, she really has a strong sense of responsibility,” the other man replied with a good-natured smile before scratching his head.

“I see. Since she has indeed arrived, however, we should allow her in, no?” he confirmed before raising his voice to be heard through the door, “Did you hear? Show her in.”

Damn...I feel bad for her, he thought, sympathizing with the chestnut-haired princess’s seemingly endless plight.



The first words out of Bona’s mouth were an apology, much as Zenjirou had expected.

“I apologize deeply for arriving without prior notice, and I cannot thank you enough for indulging my selfishness, Your Majesty.”

Certainly, unannounced arrivals were far from courteous, especially for a public figure of the palace like Zenjirou. The two of them were also not close enough that such niceties could be overlooked. But Zenjirou understood her position as the prince’s minder, so he felt no real need to remonstrate her over it.

“I do not mind in the slightest. Of course, that will not always be the case as I have my own responsibilities. Days like today, however, I see no reason to refuse you,” he replied, throwing in a slight warning even as he allowed her current actions.

The “days like today” comment was clearly referring to the fact that Francesco had shaken off his minder to meet Zenjirou alone. In other words, he was telling her that should the prince do so again, Bona was welcome to come and join them after the fact without prior notice.

The subtext seemed to have made it through. “Th-Thank you,” she managed as she bowed her head, her expression one of relief at the narrow escape.

“Yeah, guess that’s good for you, Bona,” Francesco added.

For a moment, she seemed to want to say something else to the source of her trouble but decided this wasn’t the place for it and managed to refrain, merely pausing before she said, “It is, Prince Francesco.”

Zenjirou decided that a change of mood was in order and made a nonchalant suggestion in an apparent tone of realization. “Now that I think of it, this would be a good time to take tea. What do the two of you say? Shall we move to the gazebo in the courtyard?”

The prince and princess had no particular reason to refuse.

“That sounds good; I could do with wetting my lips.”

“Yes, thank you; that would be nice.”

The gazebo was a tiled roof supported by four pillars, with trees planted carefully to direct the breeze from a nearby water fountain, making it significantly cooler than the palace. So the suggestion to spend the afternoon in the gazebo was a natural one.

However, Zenjirou’s goal was not to escape from the heat. The fountain offered a constant noise of rushing water, meaning that if they didn’t raise their voices, the conversation would not be heard by the guards or secretary. It was the best he could do for Bona to both report the earlier gaffe to her and get confirmation of the information he had gleaned from the prince.

“We shall have chilled tea, then,” Zenjirou said to the man behind him once they had relocated, purposefully not raising his voice as he sat in a wicker chair from the southern countries.

Fabio raised his voice to reply. “Excuse me, sir? Did you say something?”

“Oh, I suppose you couldn’t hear me,” Zenjirou answered, louder this time. “I said I will have chilled tea.”

The performance was to show the visiting royals that they could speak without fear of being overheard, but he couldn’t tell from their expressions whether they had picked up on it.

“I’ll have the same,” Francesco said with a bright smile. “Something cold is

just perfect for hot days, even if they say it's better to drink hot things and wash off the sweat."

He'd expected not to get anything from the prince's expression, but Bona's face was almost laughably easy to read.

"Eh? Ah! Huh? Ahh! I-I'll have chilled tea as well, please..."

If put into words, her expression would have been questioning, followed by understanding, then puzzlement before finally settling on shock.

The princess spent a few seconds looking at him blankly, not quite catching what was going on. Then her face broke into a comprehending smile as she understood, transitioning soon after into confusion over why he would change the location to one suitable for a private conversation, and then finally surmising that Francesco must have said something inappropriate before her arrival, which caused her face to morph into one of despair.

He sympathized but couldn't allow himself to act on that sympathy. In fact, he had to take advantage of the slip.

Still, I can't overstep and earn the Twin Kingdoms' displeasure either, and considering my position, I should avoid any major breakthroughs as well. This is really annoying.

While those thoughts occupied his mind, a maid took the orders from Fabio and brought silver goblets and a wooden plate of snacks to the table. The goblets were, of course, fine items, but so was the plate, with tightly packed grain and a fine design etched into it.

Once he had put the goblet to his lips and eased the dryness of his throat, Zenjirou looked at the two of them and began to speak.

"Prince Francesco, earlier you stated that the time to create a magic tool would not be an issue if you had a transparent jewel. What exactly did you mean by that? Might I hear the details?"

He had decided to strike right at the heart of the matter, but the words had a dramatic effect on Bona. She sputtered, and her shock was visible not only on her face but in her whole body. The one silver lining was that she hadn't had a drink in her mouth at the time.

Zenjirou, of course, had chosen his moment carefully, making sure that she had swallowed before speaking, and it had been worth it. It was likely little consolation to the sputtering woman before him, though.

Even so, questioning the cause of that reaction was more important to her than reacting improperly before a foreign royal.

“P-Prince Francesco, did you truly say that?!”

The fact that she didn’t raise her voice was a sign of the last bit of calm she possessed. But her skin was pale, and her lips had gone a pallid blue as the blood rushed from her face, the words clawing their way past her lips more like death throes than a mere cry.

“Yeah, I guess I did,” the prince answered, unconcerned by her reaction. “I said it pretty quietly, but I guess His Majesty heard, aha ha.”

“This is no laughing matter, Prince Francesco; it is a Sharou family secret!” Bona managed after a moment.

“Oh, yeah, it is. So, Your Majesty, could you keep it a secret, please?” the other asked quietly, his expression indicating that he’d only just realized his blunder as he laid an index finger over his lips, exasperating the princess even further.

“And just what is that supposed to solve?! It was over the moment His Majesty learned of it!”

“Princess Bona, please calm down,” Zenjirou said. “It may sound trite coming from me, but his murmurings were exceedingly quiet. I doubt anyone other than myself heard him. Let us speak more constructively.”

As he soothed her, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of wry amusement at her youthful response. If he had merely been fishing for information, her reaction itself would have been the true blunder, but she didn’t seem to realize that.

Still, she was only sixteen. In Japan, she would have only been in high school. She might have been royalty, but there were few who could maintain a poker face and talk around a topic at her age. Expecting as much from an already diligent young woman would be too much.

“Ah, yes, my apologies. I regret showing you such unsightly behavior...”

The blood returned to her face as she thought back on what she’d just done and lowered her head.

Francesco, on the other hand, reacted differently. “That’s right. You can’t undo what’s been done, so we should focus on moving on from where we are. What do you say, Your Majesty? If you can provide one of those jewels, I can greatly shorten the required time,” he offered with a wide smile, as if this were already an established routine.

Right...maybe he’s not just an idiot?

“I see. Well, I understand the gist of it all, but the one thing I do not comprehend is why it needs to be a marble—one of those jewels. I have heard that the Twin Kingdoms are the foremost experts in shaping gems. Could you not use those techniques and refine a crystal into a sphere?” Zenjirou asked as nonchalantly as he could, keeping a smile on his face to avoid showing his naturally heightened wariness.

Francesco smiled plainly and answered with an exaggerated shake of his head. “Not at all; that’s an overestimation of our techniques. We do indeed have the best jewelers on the Southern Continent, but it is impossible to take clear materials and grind them into a sphere. Right, Bona?”

The princess seemed conflicted for a few moments as the conversation moved back to her, but eventually she sighed deeply and answered. “Yes. To be more precise, there are no craftsmen in the kingdom who can do so at present. The polishing is dependent on their skill level, so there have been those who were capable of such accomplishments in the past. Of course, even they had a relatively low success rate, and the time required meant that they could only produce three or four such gems during their careers. And such high-caliber craftsmen could hardly be expected to dedicate their lives to creating them.”

“I see,” Zenjirou answered with an impressed nod. Even on Earth, grinding mineral deposits into spheres was a relatively modern advancement. He didn’t know the details, but it was a terribly difficult technique. Marbles, in comparison, were much simpler. Unlike crystal balls, they weren’t ground into shape; they were *made* spherical.

Put roughly, if the molten liquid glass was allowed to roll down a helical slope into a pool, and timed so that it was solid when it reached the bottom, it would be spherical. Of course, most of the products would end up warped and not spherical, but you just had to do it in bulk and pick the best of the batch.

While vague memories of a high school trip to a glasshouse and a marble-making demonstration played in the back of his mind, he continued. “That certainly would make them valuable, but how much of an effect does it actually have?”

“Well...” Bona murmured, still reluctant to make everything public.

But the prince next to her had no such scruples. “It’s on another level. With one of the jewels you gave to Princess Isabella, an enchantment of one of the four general magics would take only a day. The color and shape are most important for enchanting. Sounds about right, yeah, Bona?”

Francesco seemed wholly uninterested in stopping his chatter, and Bona’s expression, which was always easy to read, made that clear. If she wanted to shut him up, she’d need to order the guards to do it physically.

With that realization, she composed herself and decided to take charge of the conversation, to turn it from unilaterally offering the information to Zenjirou to more of a mutually beneficial exchange.

She gathered her feeble determination and met Zenjirou’s eyes before nodding with a smoother expression. “Yes, the closer to transparent something is, the more easily the mana flows through it while enchanting. Even if the item isn’t completely clear and colorless, mana will pass through it more easily than something less so. That is why gems are so prized for the process. As for the shape... Ah, my apologies, I got caught up and started lecturing you. Are you interested in such things, Your Majesty?”

Once she had revealed a certain amount of information, she stopped and somewhat blatantly cut herself off. It was obvious enough for Zenjirou to pick up on her ulterior motive.

Ah, I see, she wants me to say that I am. If she can get that admission, then it changes the situation from being something that Prince Francesco spoke out of turn about to being something they discussed because I showed an interest.

Recognizing her goal, he decided there was no need to play by their rules here. Yet cornering them could potentially lead to troubled relations with the Twin Kingdoms. Once his thoughts had raced to that conclusion, he smiled slightly more widely than he normally would have and answered.

“Well, the topic is deeply interesting; however, I fear I am the wrong one to speak with about it. It pains me to say it, but I know very little of magic. I only gained a perception of mana during this past year, so I feel like I would offend you by saying something silly. I’m sure Her Majesty would be a more appropriate choice.”

In other words, he was telling her, “I can’t offer you anything in return for more information. You know that, right? Take that sort of thing to the queen.”

It was rushed, so he was being fairly obvious with the undertones, but it seemed to be the right call as the princess smiled slightly in relief.

“I see, then I shall continue the conversation with Her Majesty in the future. Would that be agreeable?”

“It would. I will convey that to her as well.”

With the conversation finally over, Zenjirou felt that he had been released from roughly the same level of pressure as the chestnut-haired princess. Unlike Bona, however, he was able to keep it off his face due to having a bit more experience.

Francesco’s behavior, meanwhile, was quite different from his earlier chatter as he simply watched their interaction with a carefree smile.



After parting ways with the Sharou royals at the gazebo, Zenjirou returned to his office. The only other person in the room was Fabio, and while it was considerably warmer inside than by the gazebo, he no longer had the weight of a pending task hanging over him, so it felt more pleasant than before.

He sat on the leather sofa with his knees apart, relaxing and letting out a deep breath. Fabio spared him a glance but said nothing. He must have understood the need to take a moment to relax when one had the time.

Irritatingly, the secretary waited until the exact moment Zenjirou had caught his breath, then spoke up.

“Do you have a moment, Sir Zenjirou? I noticed that you relocated to the gazebo during your meeting. Am I to assume that was due to a conversation not intended for our ears?”

Zenjirou considered for a moment that the man could read how energized he was, but he had to answer the question. He gave a short nod before adjusting his posture and leaning back into the chair. Then he looked up at the secretary.

“That’s right. It involved some state secrets of the Twin Kingdoms. Honestly, I didn’t imagine Prince Francesco would let so much information slip. It pains me to say it, but it isn’t information you can hear from me. I’ll be telling Her Majesty the details, so if you feel you absolutely must know, you’ll need to ask her.”

“Hmm... I see,” Fabio replied, bringing a hand to his pointed chin and thinking for a while.

It was a rarity for the man to think for a long period of time. Zenjirou wondered if there was a problem with his answer. He waited nervously for the secretary’s response while keeping the concern off his face.

Once Fabio had his thoughts in order, he nodded slightly and spoke almost as if to himself. “They may be outwitting us.”

Zenjirou frowned at the ominous proclamation. “Outwitting? What do you mean? Explain.”

He had no memory of misstepping in a way that could be called into question. If anything, it was a complete diplomatic win, even if it had merely started as a slip on the other royal’s part.

Fabio’s expression didn’t change in the slightest as Zenjirou looked harshly at him.

“Very well. You personally heard classified information from the Sharou family, which is a significant issue. Allow me to confirm: did Prince Francesco ask for your silence afterwards?”

“He did. He asked me to keep it to myself,” Zenjirou answered despite his confusion.

Fabio nodded, almost as if he had expected it. “So whatever their aim, I believe we will have to abide by that. It involves classified information from the Twin Kingdoms. If we take advantage of the information, I do not know how productive the outcome will be, but it will not be an unconditional victory. Of course, your meeting today will be officially recorded. A wonderful diplomatic success; I do believe that it will dramatically increase your renown, Your Majesty.”

“Ah...” Zenjirou ignored the title as he let out a dazed sigh. The secretary’s meaning was clear. If Capua used the information they had obtained today, the greater the benefit, the more it would improve Zenjirou’s renown, whether they liked it or not.

It went without saying that this would be a real inconvenience for them. Capua had a strong patriarchal side to their society, and such achievements would serve as sufficient reason to increase his influence. There were a large number of nobles who saw Aura as a competent stateswoman but had an emotional reaction to answering to a female.

There was, of course, the issue of legitimacy, so no one was foolish enough to suggest that the throne and crown pass straight to Zenjirou, but there was a “logical argument” to be made that he should have the same level of influence as any other accomplished royal.

There were certainly some nobles who made this argument purely out of a sense of courtesy, feeling that it was his right, but others felt that he would be more manageable with greater influence than Aura was.

“So...what? They have the initiative now?” Zenjirou asked uncertainly, still confused.

The secretary gave a short nod. “Indeed. We may gain an advantage if the matter goes public, but it will also create chaos. Therefore, we must keep the information private. We are inevitably on the reacting side.”

“Why are we required to keep the information secret when they’re the ones who leaked it? That feels somewhat unfair.”

Fabio’s assessment seemed correct, but Zenjirou couldn’t contain his displeasure. Eventually, though, his surprise abated and he regained his usual cognitive abilities.

“So, Prince Francesco was *aiming* to create a bothersome situation? I do admit it seems far too contrived for this whole thing to be a coincidence, caused by someone so easily carried away.”

The older man shrugged slightly. “Who knows? It does seem too much to purely be a matter of chance. Even if his behavior is all an act and he is more intelligent than we believe, I think it would be overestimating him to assume that the entire situation was engineered this way. After all, if you were a man who desired your own achievements, it would be quite another matter, and it would never have allowed for the current situation, if that was their goal,” he answered.

Fabio was quite correct. Zenjirou was an exception to every rule, and almost no other male royal would have kept such information a secret for his wife’s sake. Ordinarily, a prince consort would take immediate advantage of such knowledge, and the Twin Kingdoms would suffer a significant loss.

“Hmm, certainly,” Zenjirou answered, “but it cannot be solely an issue of chance thanks to an idiot. It also can’t be a wise man pretending to be stupid and guiding everything. So, what exactly is going on?” The question was mostly rhetorical.

“I do not know,” the secretary replied. “If it was neither complete coincidence nor intentional, perhaps it is a mix of the two. Perhaps they have a larger goal that is more important than the confidential information he divulged. Regardless, we lack sufficient information to make any assumptions at this time.”

The fact was, nothing that Fabio had said really amounted to an answer.



As Zenjirou and Fabio’s grave conversation took place, Francesco and Bona had returned to the southern buildings and were in the midst of a now-standard lively conversation as they walked along a lengthy corridor. The discussion was one where they never quite came to an agreement.

“Prince Francesco!” Bona protested. “*Please*, I beg you to *tell* me when you are going to be visiting either His Majesty Zenjirou or Her Majesty.”

“Sorry, sorry. You just seemed so busy lately that I didn’t want to disturb you. Guess I ended up causing trouble instead. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

More accurately, Bona was carrying out the lively part of the conversation, and Francesco answered in his typical nonchalant manner, with his usual affable smile.

“Please do.”

Being here as his minder, she had to criticize him, but she hesitated to continually scold a man who was both older and of a higher rank, so she let the matter slide with a torn expression on her face.

As the conversation drew to a close, they arrived at a room. This first building contained Francesco’s living quarters, and Bona’s were next door in the second building. However, here was an urgent discussion they needed to have.

Bona trotted through the door after him, their guards holding it open respectfully. The temperature in the room was cooler, enough so that you noticed it immediately upon entering.

Naturally, once the decision had been made that Francesco and Bona would be spending an extended period of time in another country, they had been allowed to bring a certain amount of magic tools to make their lives there easier.

The coolness of the room was the result of one such item. A silver tray incorporated magic that created a mist with wind manipulation. The tray constantly had mist wafting from it like white smoke, which was then circulated around the room by a pleasant breeze.

There was no magic to alter the water’s temperature, so it was not as effective as the air conditioning that Zenjirou had brought with him. But it was enough to be like sitting in the shade on the bank of a stream.

The foreign prince and princess let out sighs of relief as they were released from the unfamiliar heat and humidity before taking seats across from each other. The wicker chairs and wooden table were all Capuan-made. While

neither of them would call the furniture uncomfortable, there was a palpable difference from what they were used to.

Francesco shifted in his seat, not feeling entirely comfortable as he began to speak. “Phew, so much cooler. I really am sorry, Bona. I don’t think there’s a need for concern though, is there? I mean, father and grandfather both said that I could talk about anything for those jewels.”

“His Majesty and His Highness said to prioritize obtaining the jewels and that you could offer classified information in the worst case. Not one word was said about tossing such information around in such a reckless strategy,” Bona said firmly, correcting the prince’s conveniently altered recollection.

The blond didn’t falter in the slightest. “That’s naive. You’re underestimating their powers of deduction. If they gave me permission to divulge things, they were prepared for it to be done immediately. After all, they’re both well aware that I’m not smart enough to remember specific conditions.”

While Francesco puffed himself up in pride, Bona slumped. “Your Highness... That is something that should not be said with such pride,” she managed in a low voice, offering the retort despite the dull ache that was building in her head.

The memory of being entrusted with her current duty passed again through her tired mind. When she had been entrusted with the role, she had been given a significant sum of money as compensation. The reward had made her shake with the enormity and importance of her responsibility, but she had a sneaking suspicion that it might have simply been an advance for the bother she was bound to undergo.

Francesco’s smile didn’t dim at all as she gave him a sidelong look while considering that. “Ah, don’t worry about it; it’s all good. More importantly, take a look at this. His Majesty gave it to me. It’s great, isn’t it?”

He unwrapped the red cloth. The transparent whiskey bottle sat inside it, with the spirits Zenjirou had distilled being within the bottle itself. The contents were not the important element, though.

“Wh-What?!”

Perhaps as expected, Bona's eyes lit up as she leaned over the table. The chair clattered rudely to the floor, but she didn't seem to notice, let alone care.

"You can pick it up, but be careful. It's apparently pretty fragile. Bona? You listening?"

Her eyes were blazing, and she offered no reply, simply reaching for the bottle. She used both hands, careful not to knock or drop it, so she had at least heard the warning. Once it was in front of her, she sat back down and stared at it with an intensity that suggested that even blinking would be wasteful.

"Beautiful... It's wonderfully made. Was it created from the same materials as those transparent jewels? This pattern as well... The size and depth are completely equal along all of the lines. I cannot see even the slightest distortion. How could such a thing be created, I wonder?"

"Um, Bona? You know that His Majesty gave that to *me*, right? Don't forget that; it's not yours," Francesco told the princess worriedly.

For her part, Bona was cradling the bottle in both hands, intensely enough that one might wonder if she was warming the alcohol within.

"Prince Francesco!" she suddenly declared.

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

"Would you give this to me?"

The request was not a surprising one, but it was far from the impression one would have of Bona as she normally carried herself. She was generally almost vexingly reserved and selfless, but her personality changed completely when there was a hint of a new technique in jewellery on the table.

"I can't do that. His Majesty gave it to me directly. It would be rude if I immediately gave it to someone else."

"Th-Then just give me this bit at the end."

"No can do. If I broke it there, everything would spill out. A hole like that would make it useless."

"If it ends up being useless, I'll take the rest as well!"

“No, no, no. I said it’d be useless if it broke, so it will be a real problem if you do that, understand? You do get it, right? Please.”

It was a matter of offense and defense, or maybe more like slapstick. Either way, the exchange—and the rare role reversal—continued until Bona returned to her senses.



That night, after having eaten and bathed, Zenjirou sat across from his wife in more casual clothing. They were in their air-conditioned room, discussing the events of the day.

“I see... A rather troublesome ‘slip’ from the prince. Certainly something I do not know whether to rejoice or despair over,” Aura remarked once the events of the afternoon had been explained. She leaned back in her seat.

“Then again,” she continued, “you have managed to confirm the marbles’ efficacy regardless of the method used. Well done.”

“Thanks. I can’t exactly take the credit for it, though, and it wasn’t really my own achievement. Still, what do you think? I reckon Fabio’s right and it puts us in an awkward position because I was alone when I heard it first. But was it on purpose?”

“Hmm,” Aura murmured, closing her eyes and thinking for a while. “The situation is a difficult one. Truly, if my husband had been anyone other than you, it would have been a blow to me, albeit not a fatal one.”

“Aura...” he replied, his face breaking into a smile.

It was a clear statement of her trust in him. Further consideration would lead one to the conclusion that this was akin to her believing that he had no personal ambition or greed. By the metrics of this world, it was far from praise, but that was no concern to Zenjirou. He could make the judgment call that it wasn’t worth aggravating his relationship with his lovely wife by questioning it too deeply.

Aura smiled back at her happy husband as she leaned forward again, resting her arms on the table and continuing. “Currently at least, I am of the same opinion as Fabio. We lack sufficient information, so we cannot rule anything

out. We should focus more on verifying the validity of what we do know rather than attempting to divine their intentions. Therefore, I suppose we are left with giving them one item and having them create something with it. While it may be somewhat paranoid, I cannot reject the possibility that they have prepared some sort of sham in advance. Such time reductions in manufacturing would be a real boon to me as well. I can see the advantages in a tool for space-time magic, but the repeated visits necessary during the process take up a lot of time and mana,” she said, all in one breath.

Once she had said her piece, she picked up the red, faceted glass of ice water. The creation of a magic tool required not only the enchanter but also someone to use the magic that was to be enchanted. Aura’s queenly duties restricted her time, so shortening a year of work into less than ten days was invaluable.

“It’d be good for you if they spent less time on the enchanting. Wouldn’t making it faster be an issue in itself though? If the information was leaked, my ‘contribution’ could come to light,” Zenjirou suggested, voicing his worries alongside his approval of her idea.

Aura lowered her glass and placed it back on the table before answering. “The only choice is to do it in secret. We delay the announcement of anything by a year, even if it only takes several days to complete. Fortunately, the only people involved are you and myself, along with Prince Francesco and Princess Bona. With such limited numbers, keeping the secret ought not to be impossible.”

“Are you sure? This would be a pact with Prince Francesco, after all.”

The queen hesitated at her husband’s doubtful look. “Hmm... Well, I do have a certain level of reservation.”

“A certain level?”

There was a pause. “A rather high level. Yet considering the future, we should take the risk now to acquire more information.”

“Hrmm, I’ll leave those decisions to you. Have you already decided what you’ll ask them to make first?” he asked, changing the topic now that he understood her course was set.

If they had decided to hand over a marble and have the Sharou family use

their secrets, then the question of what they should commission was an important one.

The topic was of interest to her as well, as Aura leaned even farther forward and began to speak, her position and thin clothing baring her cleavage.

“Indeed, a difficult decision. Creating a tool from strong, versatile magic would certainly be convenient, but it is also exceptionally risky when you consider the chances of it falling into enemy hands. Space-time magic is the foundation of our rule, after all. Creating a tool that uses it will surrender some of that advantage, even if only in a small way. To be safe, a single-use item would be best, but that would limit its utility. A conundrum, truly.”

Zenjirou’s gaze was drawn to her chest as she rested her chin on her hand, supported by the table. Still, he answered evenly.

“Yeah, that’d be an issue. I guess that means our hidden time reversal spell, along with teleportation are no good. The other spells I can think of that would be useful are...maybe grand barrier or efficacy extension?”

“Hm, something along those lines. If it is disposable, perhaps space quake could also work. It is one of the few offensive magics we have. Creating a tool from it and then deploying it at a fort on the border would be a deterrent,” she replied, nodding in satisfaction.

As the name implied, space-time magic concerned magic that could manipulate space and time in a limited fashion. This meant that there were many spells that were of daily utility, but very few that were useful offensively.

“I see... What else? Oh, what about the summoning spell you used on me? That’s not exactly something we’re hiding, is it?”

Zenjirou was fairly sure Aura wanted lots of suggestions that could serve as inspiration rather than a final decision on anything, so he was just suggesting whatever came to mind.

“That would not work so well. There is no point in creating a tool of magic that relies on the stars and can only be used once or twice in thirty years.”

“Yeah, but I had a bit of an idea. There’s time reversal and acceleration, so I wondered if combining them would let you use the spell when you couldn’t

normally.”

“Unfortunately not. Time manipulation only works on objects without mana of their own, so such a combination could only summon non-living things, to say nothing of the fact that reversing time on even a tiny object would require me to use future expense for ten days’ worth of my mana. Acceleration is less burdensome, but even that would only allow me to obtain something from the very immediate future. Frankly, it is not worth it.”

“I get it. That’s a shame.”

Slightly chagrined, Zenjirou looked up at the ceiling. He had wanted to use the combination to get an internet connection. He had considered using time reversal or acceleration to move a speck of space to a time where the stars were favorable and then use world transfer to connect it to Earth. At the same time, he would use time reversal on his computer or phone to revert it to its state before he canceled his contract, and then maybe he would have been able to connect, but he had been too naive.

Guess that would be asking too much.

Zenjirou pulled himself together and offered another idea.

“Right, then what about future expense? I know you can use it to borrow your future mana, but you said there was no corresponding spell that let you do the opposite, like retrieve compensation for mana you didn’t use in the past, right? If you made future expense into a tool, though, you might be able to get a similar effect. If you...”

“Oh, that seems workable. We will have to discuss the details with Prince Francesco, but...”

Their conversation continued right up until the phone chimed to let them know it was time to sleep.

Intermission 2 — Fight of the Drake Marksmen Knights

While Zenjirou was being put through the wringer by the two foreign royals, the men under General Pujol's command were exterminating swarm raptors approaching from the sides of the remote road.

"Fire," the general commanded his men.

The dash-drake-mounted archers loosed arrows at his signal.

"Gaaah?!"

Scores of arrows found their way deep into the raptors' flesh. Some stuck into the surrounding trees while others fell short into the grass, but the majority found their targets.

"Whoa...so these are the Drake Marksmen," Xavier murmured in wonder, watching the fight from farther away.

The men under his command were escorting the salt as promised, so they were not participating in the current battle. Of course, in addition to their escort duties, any swarm raptors that approached would be their responsibility. From the current state of the battle, however, it seemed they would have no opportunity to make use of their weapons.

Xavier, despite his presence on the field, was mostly an onlooker as he watched the clash. The fight was essentially within his expectations. Spearmen were keeping the raptors in check, and soldiers next to them with greatshields would handle defense if it came to it. The main offensive was the archers behind them firing arrows.

The strategy was much the same as his own army had employed when they had fought the swarm. But there were two main differences. The first was that the archers were, as their name Drake Marksmen implied, still on drakeback as they fired. The second was that the shielding troops had yet to be employed even once.

“How do they keep the drakes under such tight control with all that roaring?”

It wasn't surprising that he didn't believe his eyes. Dash drakes were herbivores, prey to the carnivorous swarm raptors. Well-trained dash drakes wouldn't flee, but seeing the archers with both hands off the reins and their feet in the stirrups as they fired from their mounts was still shocking. The drakes were moving precisely as the archers wished despite the lack of reins being used. The archers themselves had unstable footing in the form of the stirrups and were unable to brace themselves, and yet they were firing accurately.

On top of that, the majority of the bows were wyvern bows—weapons that normal soldiers would struggle to draw even on stable ground. If it were just one or two of them, Xavier would have simply shrugged it off as a few impressive individuals, but that over a hundred archers were displaying such skill left him lost for words.

“Josep,” he said to the knight at his side, not tearing his gaze from the fight.

“Yes?” his father's confidant answered.

“Could your men do the same?”

“They could,” the veteran told his young commander plainly. “Without issue. Frankly, they are not quite skilled enough to be called Drake Marksmen, considering the fame that name carries throughout the Southern Continent. They were half-destroyed in the war, so considering the short time they have had to build up their numbers again, it is rather impressive, although it is somewhat disheartening for those of us who saw them fight before.”

“They were that much better?!” His adviser's reply was enough to make Xavier forget that he was on the battlefield and cry out in shock.

“They were. By the standards of the wartime marksmen, I would be lower middle class, but if I were to join their current incarnation, I would probably be lower upper class. Well, the young knights merely lack experience and training; they have decent potential. General Pujol will have them up to wartime standards before long, I imagine.”

That was a clear estimation of Pujol Guillén's military accomplishments from

someone who had witnessed them first-hand. Josep and Pujol had both attained fame in the war, so it would hardly have been surprising for the two to have marched in step. Xavier made a mental note to ask, if he ever got the chance, returning his focus to the fight in front of him.

“I understand the skill involved, but why does the general have them attack while mounted? However skilled they may be, it must lower their accuracy. I doubt someone of General Pujol’s caliber would give those instructions just as a form of training.”

The veteran knight answered his young commander’s question immediately. “It is done to get a better angle. Firing a bow from the dash drake allows you to shoot arrows horizontally over the shielders’ and spearmen’s heads.”

“Oh, I see,” Xavier answered, abashed and ruddy-cheeked at this simple fact being pointed out to him.

Josep was right. Now that Xavier looked again, the archers were firing without concern for the spearmen and shielders. If the archers were on the ground, they would have had far fewer chances to shoot. Getting to higher ground was a fundamental tactic for archery in battle.

Xavier lamented his narrow-mindedness at seeing the drakes merely as a method of transportation. As he shook his head slightly, he heard a unique roar from the dense trees that he had heard once before.

“Grrrrrghee!”

“Sir Xavier!”

“Right, it’s there!”

Josep and Xavier turned as one to see it. The creature was large enough that it looked like one could reach out and touch it, despite it being *much* farther behind the other raptors.

It was the abnormally large swarm raptor leading the likewise abnormal pack.

Naturally, the Capuan commander didn’t overlook its presence and issued instructions to the men he had on standby.

“Fourth squad, target to the forward-right. Fire.”

However, the massive drake's reaction was faster than the elite knights could put their orders into practice. The men wheeled their drakes around and fired, but the creature had already vanished into the thick greenery.

"Keeeee!"

"Gyahah!"

All at once, the other raptors began to cry out.

"We need not pursue it; our priority here is transporting the salt. Remain on guard, though," the general ordered.

"Sir!" the men's responses rang out.

Nothing unusual happened after that until the wary general gave the all-clear to relax their guard.

"Deal with the bodies on the road; we will resume our march once in formation again. Any problems?"

"No, General, we are all unharmed!" Xavier answered as he came to attention. Pujol had come to give him the responsibility of the cleanup.



It was true; Xavier's men hadn't been harmed in the slightest, which was only to be expected considering not one of them had needed to draw their weapons.

"I see. We also had no losses, though we did use more ammunition than expected. I would like to resupply once we reach the march. Can I leave the arrangements to you?"

Xavier threw his shoulders back at the question.

"Please do! Our family's merchant is in the closest village to the salt road. You should be able to resupply as you wish without a long wait."

Pujol paused before letting out an impressed murmur as his eyebrow rose. "Lord Xavier, you headed straight for the royal lands during your expedition, did you not? So were these arrangements in place beforehand?"

"They were. The preparations were to allow the salt to be distributed as quickly as possible if the subjugation were to take longer than expected."

The general let out another impressed noise after a pause. The young lord had paved the way for the materials to be distributed without delay if things went badly, even before he had set out.

His action had pros and cons, considering that if things had gone well, it would have been a needless expense, but it was evident that General Pujol saw it as praiseworthy.

"A fine judgment. That will be helpful."

"Sir!"

The young heir smiled broadly as the praise left the great war hero's lips.

Chapter 3 — Zenjirou's Blunder

Princess Bona was here as Francesco's minder. While Francesco was above her in terms of bloodline and age, and that made him their official representative, his intense personality had become well-known in the three days since he had reached the kingdom. Before long, no one would bring any actual business to him.

Inevitably, this meant that the difficult work fell on the young princess's shoulders. Of course, it was not like the prince had shut himself away and stayed quiet. He did things like mistaking guests' names at lunch, going to a ball and stepping on the hems of women's dresses, and so on. Fortunately, his oddly innocent personality meant that nothing went too far, but apologies and even occasional compensation to maintain his reputation were necessary from time to time.

All that together meant that Bona didn't have any spare time to enjoy the country's culture around jewelry as she had been looking forward to doing, dogged by her duties as she was.

Someone was concerned about her circumstances, and that was none other than Queen Aura.

"So, what?" Zenjirou asked his wife, checking that he had understood her suggestion. "It looks like Princess Bona's getting to the end of her tether, so you want to show her some kindness?"

He was already in his blue pajamas that night, lying on the bed.

"Indeed. It certainly appears that way. It is unfortunate, but Prince Francesco is too difficult to deal with. If the princess were to end up bedridden with the stress, our contact with their delegation would be closed."

Aura was also wearing her nightclothes, sitting on the side of the bed. Her expression was slightly dull as she spoke. Half a month had passed since the Sharous' arrival, and while Aura hadn't interacted with them as much as

Zenjirou, she had come to understand just how pointless it was to try to deal with Francesco directly. And it had nothing to do with whether his conduct was feigned or not; he was just difficult to come to terms with.

Unfortunately, Zenjirou wholeheartedly agreed. He had borne the brunt of their interactions with Francesco, so he knew that however bright and innocent the young man appeared, he was also a problem child down to his bones.

“Well, things are at an important juncture right now. I think you said the decision was finally made for the first tool?” he asked, lifting his head slightly from the bed.

“It was. We went with future compensation in the end. It should be rather impressive when it is done. Prince Francesco implied that adding to it would also be possible, although using only part of it will be impossible, of course. It should make it easier to use my mana much more efficiently,” she answered, turning to look at him.

Future compensation was, as the name implied, a spell that allowed someone to make up for insufficient mana by using their own from the future. It was generally a last resort, since to cast the upper tiers of space-time magic took ridiculous levels of mana, but creating a magic tool from it would allow for a completely new use. For example, Aura could use it and impart the next three days of her mana into it. For three days, she would then be entirely incapable of magic. That scenario was no different from the spell’s use up until now.

However, with the mana being stored inside a magic tool, Aura could choose exactly when to use it. On top of that, being able to add to it meant that she could imbue it with her mana on days where she had no plans to use magic, and then after a year, she would be able to invoke vast workings.

There were many restrictions, of course, like the minimum amount of mana being her daily allotment, so there would be days she could use no mana—only the imbuer would be able to use the mana, and a single use would see all of it consumed.

Regardless, the sheer utility of it was astounding. They had already given a marble to both of the royals to create it.

As he was lying down, Zenjirou propped himself up to speak. “So, with Prince

Francesco starting on the tool, he'll have some limits on his actions for a while?"

"Yes. For the next few days, Princess Bona will be released from her supervisory role. Fortunately, as far as I have heard, even the prince has immense pride in his creations, so he will go about it with extreme diligence and honesty. Therefore, I would like to enlist your aid in relaxing the princess."

"What? I *am* another country's royal, though. Won't she get overwhelmed by that and it'll have the opposite effect?"

Aura nodded at the obvious question. "True. However, she has barely begun her stay, and having nothing to do will likely see her sleeping the time away."

"I think that's a good way of using time off. Honestly, I'm jealous since I've had more work recently."

"Liar. Such a person would never have voluntarily prepared a schedule and list of potential answers on the day before their duties."

"Mrgh..." he grumbled, falling silent at his wife's teasing.

Although he couldn't really refute it, Zenjirou was somewhat aware of how grating he'd found it to spend days doing absolutely nothing after first arriving in this world.

"So, you will speak with Princess Bona on the first day and show her things from your world; your wedding ring and such." Aura brought the conversation back on track after its slight diversion. "You may even allow her to borrow them for a time. I'm sure that she will spend the rest of her free time cheerfully honing her jewelry techniques. It seems to be her purpose in life, after all."

"Ah, I get it."

He could agree with her approach. Some of his coworkers back home had actually been similar. They would spend their precious few days off each month on their hobbies, and then show up for work with bloodshot eyes declaring themselves recharged.

Zenjirou couldn't quite fathom it, not having any hobbies he was *that* invested in, but he couldn't deny that it had seemed to help them. While it

wasn't as pronounced with Bona, if he considered her to be similar in personality, he could see where Aura was coming from.

"So, can I take my ring, some currency from home, and maybe a marble?"

"You would choose those items? I will leave the exact selection to you."

"Got it; let's get to sleep, then," he said, judging the conversation to be over and deciding to play a little trick on her, moving across the bed to get behind her.

"Zenjirou?"

"Take this!"

He grabbed hold of her, wrapping his arms around her chest, and his legs around her waist, just like a koala holding onto a tree. He then rolled back, pulling her into the bed.

"One, two, go!"

"Ah, come on!"

Despite her apparent protest, there was a smile on her face. If she had been against it, he would have found it difficult to move her. Aura was stronger than him, and although she would never say it out loud, had not finished losing the extra weight from her pregnancy, so she was currently heavier than he was.

"Mmhh..."

Whether he was aware of this truth or not, Zenjirou nuzzled his face in the crook of her neck to feel even a little bit closer to her as he held her atop the bed.

"Honestly, what has gotten into you?" Aura asked, craning her neck to look at him as he held on.

"I mean, I've been pretty busy and getting back late, right?" he said with a smile. "I've barely been able to hold Zenkichi. It's pretty lonely."

"Oh, am I a substitute for Carlos?" she asked, adding a pout.

He smiled lovingly back at her as he answered. "I'd never be that rude. Besides, you're completely different from him. You're bigger, heavier—" he had

intended to finish off with “softer,” but she interrupted him.

Aura had put up with things so far like a patient pet, but now she turned it around in an instant, breaking his hold and straddling him. Apparently, the topic of “weight” was somewhat taboo for her, what with her not having lost the extra pounds from the pregnancy.

“Aura...” he began, looking dazedly up at his smiling wife.

She gave a joking laugh. “All right. I’ll stand in for Carlos tonight. Papa, give me a hug.”

“Uh, I said you weren’t—”

She refused to listen and pitched forward onto his chest, putting her arms between him and the bed and holding on tight. Realizing that she was playing around, he laughed and decided to play along with the prank.

“Aha ha, come on, I don’t remember having such a big daughter,” he chuckled, wanting to get his arms back around her to stroke her hair or pat her back, but she had hers trapping his.

“Papa, I love youuu.”

“Thanks, I love you too, but could you ease up a bit? You’re holding on kind of tight...”

“Papaaa,” she repeated. She had to have heard him, but she showed no sign of relaxing her grip.

“Come on, Aura. Hey, let go a bit. It’s pretty tight here.”

Her huge, soft breasts pressed into him, and her legs wrapped tenderly around him as she kissed at his neck like a spoiled child. It should have been a bit of fun, his wife acting adorable like this. But for some reason...

“Aura, it’s actually starting to get painful now. Come on, let go a bit? I give, I give! My arms are going numb.”

“Hugs, Papa, hugs. I love youuu.”

Zenjirou had an ominous image of a tigress preying upon him that just wouldn’t leave his mind.



Several days later, Zenjirou was visiting the second of the southern buildings—the one that Bona was making use of. He had with him his ring, the wallet he had used in Japan, and a pouch with beads inside it.

I just can't get used to the lax schedule here, he thought vacantly as he sipped at the tea he had been provided with after being told to wait.

Appointments in this world, considering the lack of mechanical clocks, were awfully laissez-faire with their actual start time, which was a shock for anyone coming from present-day Earth. Even aiming to arrive on time would result in a wait, and the person keeping you waiting would not consider it rude in the slightest. With the lack of accurate timekeeping, there was nothing to outright state whose sense of time was correct, so it was to be expected.

That said, there were limits.

This feels a little too late, he thought, discreetly lifting his sleeve to check the watch wound around his left wrist. 10:18 a.m.

It had been a little past nine when he had been shown to the room, so he had been waiting for over an hour now. Zenjirou was an aristocrat, the prince consort, no less. Even with the leeway allowed by this world's standards, he had never been kept waiting for this long.

Hmm, I'd honestly have said that Princess Bona would be the type to hate keeping people waiting. Did I misjudge her? Or has something happened?

The normal practice in this sort of situation was to provide some kind of company to ensure that the guest wasn't bored, but Zenjirou had declined at first because of the bother. Just as he began to regret that decision after having so much time on his hands, there was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty; Princess Bona is ready for you now. I will guide you," came the voice of the messenger, indicating that the meeting was finally about to start.

"I-I apologize for keeping you waiting. I cannot express my thanks enough for you going to the effort of visiting me."

Zenjirou was lost for words at the sight of the girl bowing before him.

“Umm...Princess Bona, correct?” he asked, just to make sure.

“Y-Yes, I...am...” she said tremulously, hunching in on herself.

“Ah, well, what to say...” Zenjirou murmured, looking the girl up and down, aware of how rude he was being.

She was relatively slight, wearing a fairly plain light purple dress. She had a well-structured face, but one with no distinguishing characteristics. All of that was fine, and exactly as Bona had been every other time they had interacted.

The problem was farther up. All of her hair had been pulled back and tied up. If he absolutely had to describe it, he'd have called it a very low-tied ponytail, perhaps, although it was far from anything worth being called a hairstyle. It had just been pulled back and tied out of the way.

A closer inspection revealed that the tie wasn't anything as refined as a ribbon. Rather, it was a thin hemp cord. Not everything had been contained either, and strands of her hair were sticking out at random all over her head. Frankly, it was shameful. Even though this was an unofficial visit and involved no one else, it was nowhere near suitable for the greeting of a foreign royal.

If she had only been slightly untidy, he would have pretended not to notice, but he couldn't let it stand without comment.

“Um...could I hear the details?”

“You can,” the princess answered eventually with a resigned nod.

Once they had sat down across from one another, she explained the sequence of events, her pale skin flushing red right to her neck from the shame.

“I see,” Zenjirou said when she had finished.

Bona remained silent, her hands gripping each other atop her lap as she shook. He gave her a sympathetic look as he summarized the situation and asked to make sure he had understood everything.

“So, you prepared to greet me early this morning?”

“I did.”

“But then I was later than you thought I would be, so you had too much free time.”

“R-Right.”

“So you told yourself you would use just a little of your time to carry on with the engraving of a brooch that you had been working on last night.”

“I did,” she answered after a pause.

“Doing that made you think your hair was in the way, and your ribbon was too far, so you just used the string from around your tools to tie it up.”

“That was a mistake...”

“After that, you got engrossed in your engraving and carried on until the maid told you I had arrived.”

“I-I am truly so sorry.”

“You panicked and tried to do something about your hair, but you couldn’t get the cord out, and even the maids helping just made it worse. Time was running out and you were left with the choice of keeping me waiting even longer or just coming as you were. And finally, here we are.”

“I am deeply sorry!”

As the girl bowed in front of him, a thought came to Zenjirou.

I see what she’s like. There were lots of girls like this in the science department at college. Those kinda ditzy chicks who got wrapped up in their hobbies.

He remembered lots of people like Bona back home. Younger women often spent their limited time and money on fashion and hanging out with friends. A small portion who had specific hobbies would prioritize those hobbies over the rest. There were similar men, but they were much more common than women because of a definite difference between male and female hobbyists.

That difference lay in the image they presented to the world. Men could be unconcerned with fashion without much pushback as long as they maintained a certain level of hygiene, but society was far tougher on women who didn’t keep up with fashion trends. So much so that there was a saying that they were only allowed in public without makeup until they were twenty.

Therefore, to avoid the judgment of society, female hobbyists “had” to dedicate at least a portion of themselves to fashion and such. As a result, female hobbyists crafted a facade of normalcy that didn’t allow their true selves to shine through in short meetings. The girl in front of him now was one of those hobbyists without her camouflage.

What do I even do here? he asked himself, tempted to pretend not to see her shaking and just return to the inner palace. This was work, though, under the guise of an informal meeting, so he couldn’t choose to flee.

“Hmm, well I can hardly say it’s of no concern, but I certainly accept your apology. As long as you endeavor not to let it happen again, it’s fine.”

“Th-Thank you so much,” the girl bowed deeply once more, almost like a poor village girl being given leniency by the prefectural magistrate.



Still, thought Zenjirou to himself as he watched the princess’s eyes sparkle at his ring, the beads, and the Japanese coins in front of her, *she apologized straight up rather than feigning illness or something, so I figured she’s too honest or stubborn for her own good. Maybe she’s actually way too into her hobbies.*

He’d expected her to follow up with a formal apology and ask to defer the meeting. Instead, she had looked up at him through her eyelashes and spoken with a red face, saying, “So, if you would grant your forgiveness, would it be acceptable to have our conversation now?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, we can.”

Zenjirou’s answer was, he had to admit, one given half reflexively before he’d been able to parse the reversal of his expectations.

Her appearance was a real source of dissonance; everything below her neck was fine, the light and sleeveless dress covering her nicely, but her hair was a mess as she perused the rings and beads on the table.

“Amazing. These transparent grains are almost exactly the same size. The hole in the middle is so tiny as well...”

The look in her eyes was different from the usual sparkle a woman would get when looking at jewelry. She studied the beads with a craftsman's eye, and Zenjirou observed wordlessly. Bona had her neck craned over the table, so he was left looking at the crown of her head.

Hmm, her hair's a mess, but it's still sparkling with silver dust. I guess it figures... She had gotten ready to meet me before getting distracted... Huh?

He suddenly noticed pieces of metal too big to be called dust in her hair. They were longer and spiraled, almost like the shavings from using a chisel on wood.

Chisel shavings? She was just doing some engraving, right? Maybe...

His thoughts flowed one after another upon noticing that. Bona's hair was always sparkling with the silver dust and was straight for about half its length before breaking out into a wave. Was it his imagination that that seemed to be where her hair had been pulled out of the way?

Maybe her "silvered half wave" style is to disguise the kinks in her hair from tying it all up, and to hide the scraps of metal?

It was likely not quite as bad as he imagined, but there was a fair chance that the style had come about to make sure she didn't need to deal with the metal and twisted hair if it came down to it.

She'd had the same hairstyle every time he remembered seeing her—the partially straight, partially wavy combination with silver dust shining in her locks. It wasn't *strange* that she would have kept her hair in the same style, but it was more common for women her age to change their style based on the type of event they were attending and the dress they were wearing. That thought certainly lent some credence to his idea.

"Incredible. The coins are all the same size and shape. Your Majesty, could I request the details?" she eventually asked, looking at the objects no longer as she met his gaze.

"Very well. The details I know, at least. As I said before, such things are far from my specialty, so I do not think I can tell you as much as you hope."

"Not at all; thank you. Even the smallest amount of information could be an inspiration."

Well, trying to figure out her hairstyle won't do either of us any good, he decided, choosing to look away and continue the conversation. Now that he was no longer focused on finding clues about her hairstyle, their discussion went more smoothly.

“I see... Using diamonds to shape the diamonds? It is extremely simple, but I had never thought of it. There are still the issues of powdering the diamonds and then applying that powder to a file, but it may be possible to work with diamonds without magic.”

You could practically hear the excitement and happiness in her smile, prompting Zenjirou to smile back.

“I hope it proves to be helpful, but can you not use magic to work diamonds? I had heard that skilled earth mages could do so.”

“I cannot,” she answered his ignorant question with a troubled smile. “I have confidence in my precision with earth magic, but I am far from having enough mana to affect diamonds with my spells. Conversely, those who possess the mana to do so often lack precise control, so only the true geniuses of magic who can overcome that paradox are able to refine diamonds that way. While he has not actually done so, I believe Prince Francesco would be capable of it.”

“Oh, now that is impressive,” Zenjirou said, not acting, truly surprised by her high estimation of his skills. As far as he knew, the only people in Capua who could beat Bona in terms of mana capacity were Aura and the head mage, Espiridion.

This was all ignoring baby Carlos Zenkichi, of course.

Aura was also one of those typically powerful mages who had difficulty with precision and so would be unable to put it into practice. Espiridion boasted more mana than the average royal, but he still had considerably less than Aura, so he may not have had sufficient mana for such a task. That implied just how skilled a mage Francesco was.

Bona continued, unable to contain her mixed feelings. “As you may be aware, he certainly has his...well, problems. But he is a first-rate mage, without a doubt. While I believe I would be slightly superior in my fine control, it would be no contest in terms of mana capacity. In truth, it is rather astounding that

someone with such vast reserves would only be slightly less precise than me with its application,” she said praisingly.

Although she may not have been aware of it herself, the same praise could have been applied to her, if not quite to the same extent. By the metrics of bloodline mages, Bona had a meager portion of mana amongst royals, but it was still a large amount compared to normal mages.

Despite that, she claimed precision to be her forte, so she had significant skill herself. Her self-evaluation was either unreasonably low or she was trying to avoid coming across as overly prideful. Either way, she changed the topic and picked the beads up from the table.

“These are intriguing. Joining them on a thread would make something special. The same kind of concept exists in the traditional crafts of my home, but the practice uses colored stones with holes, so the shapes do not match, and no two of the same color exist. There are none so small as these either, so they can only be used for rather bulky bracelets and necklaces. In comparison, there are many of the same size and shape here, so it would make an extremely beautiful item.”

“Indeed, experts make many such things, rings, brooches, and bracelets, for example. There are many different items you can create, so why not attempt it yourself?”

The most common use for them recently was making phone straps, but that would be hard to explain, so he refrained.

“I can?! Thank you!”

The conversation continued peacefully, both of them unconsciously growing closer.



It had been Aura’s concern before, but Zenjirou and Bona were certainly compatible.

Zenjirou had been born as a normal person in modern Japan and risen to the rank of prince consort somehow, while Bona had been born as a lowly noble and been made a royal by awakening their bloodline magic.

Beyond that, both were fundamentally diligent people and had the intelligence to understand their position and the logic to act appropriately. Essentially, they could feel sympathy for one another because—regardless of any slight differences—they had both taken higher positions than they had been born into and suffered for it.

“Huh? So you lived with your parents until you were ten?” he asked her.

“I did; that was when I was recognized as royalty. Until then, I had just been an ordinary lower noble’s eldest daughter. My parents had had high hopes for me due to the amount of mana I possessed, though.”

“I see. I imagine it must have been quite a surprise when it happened.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. It took days before it felt real. For my family and me.”

From what he had heard, if a child of a high-ranking family exhibited mana to rival royalty, they were investigated for any sign of bloodline magic, but Bona’s family had been too low-ranked for that. Therefore, she had remained undiscovered until she was ten. Her appearance had prompted a faint hope among the middle-class nobles that their child might be similar, but unfortunately, it seemed that lightning would only strike once.

“Does that mean that you learned enchantment within six years? I suppose jewellery as well?”

Bona answered his impressed question with an embarrassed smile containing a mix of humility and pride.

“I did. It was rather difficult, but learning the required etiquette was far more so. I might have been a low-ranking noble, but the etiquette for royalty is very different.”

“I get what you mean,” Zenjirou agreed reflexively and wholeheartedly.

“In comparison, while learning enchantment and jewelcrafting was difficult, it was still interesting and fulfilling. Of course, I have a long way to go yet.”

She had been studying since she was ten and was now sixteen, so in six years she had learned enough to be one of the foremost craftswomen, which was

worth significant praise. The Sharou branch families had younger skilled enchanters, jewelers, and smiths, but they had been trained their entire lives and had a head start over Bona.

At that thought, an oddity came to mind for Zenjirou.

“So, what of Prince Francesco?”

“He was seen as a first-class enchanter at twenty. He is skilled with jewellery and weaponsmithing also, so he is definitely a preeminent talent in those fields.”

Her smile had a slight tinge of jealousy, but Zenjirou wasn't in a state to notice.

I was right! That means Prince Francesco was taught as a branch member from the beginning.

Unlike the branch members, royals in the direct line were trained heavily in enchanting but were not required to learn jewelry or weapon crafting. Learning magic was hardly an overnight process, but it took even more time to learn how to make jewelry and weapons. They were skills you developed over years of working with silver and steel.

Direct members of the royal family would be taking on responsibility for the country, so they couldn't spare the time for that; there were more important things to be learning with their time. However, Francesco was young and not only a skilled enchanter but an accomplished jeweler and weaponsmith. Therefore, unless he was an utter genius, it would have required all his time to master those skills.

That means that he had no claim on the throne since he could speak, right? So it can't be because he's an idiot.

If people gave up on a child that had just come into its own as “unintelligent,” it would be those very people who the adjective truly applied to. There was almost certainly some secret related to his birth.

I'll report it to Aura later.

“It sounds like Prince Francesco has superlative skills,” he deflected while

noting that to himself. He sounded rather distracted, with his concentration mostly on his own thoughts, but fortunately, Bona didn't seem to notice.

"Indeed, his skill level is certainly my goal as an enchanter. Still, this ring absolutely refuses to be ignored. The more I look, the more astounding it appears. The three completely identical diamonds are naturally worthy of note, but the fine details in the setting are on another level. Just how was such a fine pattern created?"

Zenjirou gratefully took advantage of her attention moving back to the rings.

"That mesh pattern actually repeats the same number of times," he told her, simply parroting what the salesclerk had told him, but her surprise was obvious.

"Really? One, two, three..."

She held the ring up to her face with the first two fingers of her right hand and began doing her best to count the lines in the pattern around the setting, though the pattern was too fine for one to do so with the naked eye. Watching her try regardless prompted an unnecessary kindness in Zenjirou. It was a blessing for Bona that he had included coins with the things he had brought, and also a curse for himself.

Ah, right, he thought, his usual wariness having waned enough that he simply put his ideas into practice without any further consideration. "Excuse me," he said as he used his left hand to pluck a five yen coin from the table at the same time as he put a droplet of water on his right pinky finger, moving it to the hole in the coin.

"Hm, no good, it ended up concave. One more... Great, that should work."

After a few false starts, things went according to plan, and the hole in the coin became home to a small convex lens bulging from its center.

"Mm, right, that's done. Princess Bona, use this; it should be slightly easier to see with. Take it gently and look through the hole at what you want to view."

"Huh, okay."

She had been straining her eyes to count the lines and now followed Zenjirou's guidance and looked through the coin at the ring. Her reaction was

dramatic.

“Huh? What?! What is this?!” she cried out in surprise at her first glimpse of the world through a convex lens.

He had expected that kind of reaction, and it was possible his happiness at it made him get carried away.

“It’s a water lens. It uses refraction to make things look bigger. The riverbed looks warped when you see it through the water, right? It’s the same thing.”

“Huh? Simply looking through water makes things this big?”

“It isn’t just water. The shape is important. It’s this disc shape, where it bulges out in the middle, then gets thinner as you move to the edges.”

Bona listened hungrily to his explanation and then put her index finger into the water and began incanting as her breath grew slightly harsh with excitement.

“Hmmm...perhaps like this? *I command the water in this container to gather at my finger and take the form I desire. As compensation, I present 156 offerings of mana to the spirits of water.*”

“Ah?!”

This time, it was Zenjirou’s turn to cry out.

The water in the jug writhed like slime, and then part of it immediately gathered together in a magnifying glass shape atop her finger.

“Ah, it worked. This is incredible, truly, Your Majesty!” she cried out innocently, forgetting her manners as she saw the simple water lens she had made with her own magic.



For his part, Zenjirou couldn't muster a response.

Damn, I really screwed up this time! he finally realized, feeling a chill run down his back too late.

Bona didn't notice the look on his face as she excitedly peered at the enlarged wood grain of the table. As she did so, however, the magic ran out.

"Ah!" she cried as the spell ran its course and the lens lost its form and fell upon the table with a splash.

"My apologies for the rudeness. I suppose normal magic lacks the duration to be effective for this. Besides, the freeform manipulation of water requires too much mana. If I could make it into some kind of magic tool... Your Majesty, thank you so much!"

As one would expect, the princess's thoughts went in exactly the direction he had feared without any further prompting: to create a spell for forming lenses, then make it into a magic tool. This would lead to The Twin Kingdoms having a monopoly on the momentous discovery of lenses.

Damn, this is a real fuckup. I'll need to confess to Aura and come up with some kind of contingency plan.

"Not at all; I just hope it was useful," was all he could manage in the face of his unprecedented blunder.



That night, once he had returned to the inner palace, he revealed the entire sequence of events that had taken place during their meeting, a meek expression on his face as he delivered his report.

He had felt that their room under the AC was not a suitable venue for such a serious discussion, so they were once again sitting on opposing sofas in the living room.

"Hmm. I think you did well to report on Princess Bona's surprising appearance and the secret involved in Prince Francesco's birth, but what are you so concerned about? Would it truly be so much of a problem if the Twin Kingdoms were to develop these water lenses?" Aura asked in puzzlement, crossing her

legs after listening to her husband's repentant report.

This reaction was something Zenjirou had more or less expected. Certainly, a single convex lens could only be used as a magnifying glass, so it didn't seem to be such a threat. The worst the development would be was a "convenience" for people like Bona who worked with small and delicate objects.

Currently, despite her enthusiastic reaction, Bona herself seemed to have no suspicions of the possibilities being anything more, appearing to see it as nothing strange, taught to her freely through his generosity.

But the possibilities lenses offered were not so benign—something Zenjirou was all too aware of. His regret was due to leaking that information, despite knowing the implications, to someone he should not have in a position of influence.

He picked up a five-yen coin and began his explanation again.

"Right, take a close look: this is what I showed Princess Bona. A convex lens. It bulges at the middle and gets thinner towards the edge."

"Hmm, I see. It does indeed make things on the other side bigger. Convenient," Aura nodded after doing as he'd asked, but she remained unconcerned.

Zenjirou then flicked out the water and replaced it with a smaller amount.

"And this is a concave lens. It's the opposite; the middle is the thinnest part and it gets thicker at the edges. Things look smaller through it as well, right?"

"They certainly do, but what use is this?"

Zenjirou asked her to wait in response to her doubtful expression before standing and heading for a corner of the room. There was a box there that was filled with things he had brought from Earth but didn't use on a daily basis.

"I'm sure it was around here... Right, here we go!"

After rummaging around, he pulled something out that was wrapped in a gaudy cloth of three colors: blue, white, and red.

"This takes me back," he reminisced. "They were for matches at university. I got rid of the replica uniform and phone strap when I started work, but I kept

the scarf and opera glasses.”

Technically, only the scarf was university branded, and the opera glasses were just common for watching the matches, but that wasn’t something that needed bringing up. He unwrapped the terry-cloth scarf with “YOKOHAMA” written on it in the Latin alphabet and put it back in the box before carrying the folding binoculars to his waiting wife.

“Zenjirou?”

“Here, look through these. They use both concave and convex lenses. Well, just the two types of lens won’t make something this clear; the image would be inverted, but I’m sure this will show you how serious it is.”

He unfolded them and passed them to Aura after adjusting the focus. The late hour meant that they couldn’t look outside, but the room was huge, and the glasses only magnified things by about three times. The room was sufficient to show their efficacy.

“What?! What is this?!” Aura exclaimed after following his instructions, as surprised as he had expected.

“Those only magnify things by three times, but I’m sure you can get greater magnification depending on the lenses you use. Princess Bona only knows about convex lenses now, and I doubt she would immediately think of combining the two types, but it is technically possible for her to do so right now.”

Indeed, there had been a considerable delay on Earth between the discovery of lenses and their combination into microscopes and telescopes. With that in mind, they perhaps need not be so panicked, but optimism could be dangerous.

Aura looked through the binoculars several times, thinking silently. This was a piece of equipment that could be used to magnify distant places. The core of the device was the set of lenses, and if they managed to create a magic tool that produced them, the Twin Kingdoms would have a monopoly on the device.

Finally coming to a conclusion, his wife’s expression shifted to the harshest he had seen from her yet.

“A blunder indeed.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

She shook out her red hair and sighed at her sincerely remorseful husband.

“It may be too much to simply write off. Realistically, it puts our response as negotiating for preferential access to whatever magic tool they develop. At best, we could have the enchantment magic in your blood and also establish Capua as a manufacturer.”

While he had expected it, Zenjirou was reluctant for the conversation to move in that direction and offered his own suggestion.

“We could also focus more efforts on glass manufacturing. These binoculars are made from strengthened plastic, but lenses are made mainly from glass in my world. So if we can establish an industry to work with glass, we could also train craftsmen to produce lenses and work their magic tool into just a high-class item.”

He had been considering how to deal with this problem since he had made the mistake, so his suggestion was delivered fluently.

“I see. I can understand the core of the suggestion. Before anything else, however, we need to deal with you,” she declared. “You are awfully lacking in caution where Princess Bona is concerned; are you aware of this?”

Zenjirou clammed up at the sharp query. It was an accusation of being negligent with a specific woman, coming from his wife, so he felt immensely guilty even without having done anything to be guilty of. Being aware that the accusation was a fact made him feel even more so.

His voice wasn’t particularly steady, but he held her gaze as he answered. “Uhh, well, I guess, yeah, I am, maybe? I don’t know how to put it; she’s just really easy to speak with. We’re sort of on the same wavelength... I guess kind of well-matched...”

“Hmm...”

The queen rested her chin in her hand at her husband’s confession. His awareness of it was the silver lining here. Because of his acknowledgment, her warning would not be mistaken as being driven by jealousy.

At that point, she herself realized that she was afraid of making him hate her, and she gave herself a mocking smile in the privacy of her mind. Of course, no queen would allow such thoughts to show on her face.

“If you are aware of it, that makes things much simpler. I apologize, Zenjirou, but from now on, you are not to meet with Princess Bona on your own. Such errors cannot be allowed to happen again unintentionally, even if there is no such intent on your part or malice on hers, understood?” she asked, maintaining her grave expression.

The judgment was not one that weighed particularly heavily on Zenjirou. There were certainly times where he felt they got along well, and he enjoyed their conversations, but that national interest came first.

“Sure, got it. I’ll keep our interactions to circumstances where she is acting as Prince Francesco’s minder.”

“I *am* sorry, Zenjirou, but please do. I have to apologize for changing my tune so drastically when I was the one who set up the meeting in the first place.”

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it,” he told her. “It might have ended up like this now, but there were no red flags when you first made the decision, and most of it was because I let my guard down. Honestly, I should be the one apologizing.”

“Hm, very well.”

The queen let out the tiniest sigh of relief at how calmly he took it.



Late that night, once she was sure her husband was sleeping soundly beside her, Aura quietly slipped from their bed and moved next door to the living room. She fumbled in the dark until she found the switch for the lamp. Clicking it on, she grunted slightly at the harsh white light dazzling her night-adjusted eyes. She blinked several times to let her eyes grow accustomed, then a knock came quietly at the door.

“Oh, you are here. Enter,” she answered.

“Thank you, excuse me,” came the answer, as her visitor stepped into the room. It was a maid with striking blonde hair, the likes of which were rarely

seen in Capua. Officially, she was nothing more than one of the maids of the inner palace, but in truth, she was an important part of the information network between the maids of the inner and royal palaces. She was one of Aura's most trusted subordinates, on the same level as Fabio and Espiridion.

Still clad in her light nightclothes, Aura sat on the leather-covered sofa and spoke casually.

"Give your report."

"At once. According to the maids assigned to Princess Bona, she showed no sign of attempting seduction."

"I see," answered Aura, resting her chin in a cupped hand and thinking. "So does that mean she truly has no personal ulterior motive?"

They were resigned to the fact that the Sharou family would be aiming for Zenjirou's bloodline. She had been concerned that while their first choice would be to go after Zenjirou when he was visiting the Twin Kingdoms after learning teleportation magic, they might have Bona move on him while she was here as well. But there had been no reports of that thus far.

Aura had a particular touch of worry that Bona might have done so when faced with the temptation of having her target alone in her temporary residence, and yet no such thing had been reported.

"However, my husband is awfully familiar with her, despite that. Is this just a coincidence? Surely the distant Twin Kingdoms cannot be aware of his preferences..."

In truth, even many of the nobles trying to push a concubine on Zenjirou didn't seem to understand his type either. The one thing they were certain of was that he was very close with Aura, but she and Bona had nothing in common.

Every conclusion seemed unlikely. However, while she didn't want to claim anything illogical like "women's intuition," she was concerned about how close Bona and Zenjirou were. Her husband had never been so open with Octavia, famed as the flower of the court, or with Fatima Guillén, who was full of youth and confidence, or even any of the maids he interacted with on a daily basis.

If she were to admit it, she was aware that underneath her wariness were the ugly emotions of a jealous wife. Fortunately, her position as queen also made it acceptable to place limits on the relationship between her husband and a foreign princess. While it was impossible to prevent him from taking a concubine in the future, she should definitely avoid the first such woman being a foreign princess.

“Very well,” she decided eventually, “tell the maids to report any major changes. However, alerting the guests and putting them on guard is the biggest risk, so nothing outside of the regular reports is necessary. Fundamentally, they are to behave as loyal maids and listen to what Princess Bona says,” she instructed, telling herself that this was the correct course of action even while being aware that her feelings were the main reason for them.

The maid smiled for a moment at the queen’s unusually womanly behavior but smoothed her expression before she was noticed.

“I shall do so,” she said, her bow sending her long blonde hair swaying before she quietly withdrew.

Intermission 3 — A Quiet Road

The mixed forces led by General Pujol and Xavier were progressing well along a quiet road. They had already left the main road once to deliver the salt and were now returning. They had resupplied ammunition and provisions as planned, so the carriages were heavily laden, and progress was slower. In exchange, however, the soldiers had a much lighter mental burden.

“It’s quiet...” Xavier observed from his newly granted position next to the general, who had taken a liking to the young commander.

“It is. That could be bothersome.”

“Are they wary?”

Pujol gave a slight nod of agreement in answer. “They are. If their wariness is towards humans in general, we can call this a success. If it is towards armed groups of humans or us in particular then it just makes things more difficult.”

“The experts say the swarm raptors grow in both size and intelligence as they get older.”

The general made a harsh sound with no expression on his face. “That they do. We can forsake any possibility of them conveniently being afraid of humanity in general, then. Lord Xavier!”

“Sir?” Xavier answered, straightening in his saddle at the change in tone.

“I will be dividing our forces and continuing separately. You continue leading your men but ensure you remain in earshot of the whistle.”

“Understood. We are to be bait?”

Pujol nodded in answer.

“You are. Or, more accurately, we shall all be. We will create multiple groups of approximately the same strength. Your army will be the most numerous. As a result, I expect you are unlikely to be attacked, but it goes without saying that you must remain on guard.”

“Yes, sir; leave it to us.” Xavier saluted atop his drake.

The squad under Pujol’s direct command would be the smallest in number. Yet their equipment, training, and leader’s strength being taken into account would probably result in them being stronger than Xavier’s army.

If the raptors attacked Pujol’s squad, there would be no problem. It would mean that they were simply wary of large groups. If they were to do the unthinkable and attack Xavier’s team, however, it would mean that they were considering the overall fighting strength of a group, including its armament and experience level.

“Men, halt! I shall now explain our new formation. All officers gather here.”

They would prefer to not come across difficulties, but Pujol gave no voice to those thoughts as he calmly instructed his men.



Several hours later, Pujol’s “worst-case” thankfully had not occurred. The raptors attacked Pujol’s group, simultaneously the smallest and strongest.

“Gyaaahh!”

“Circular defense, men. Reinforcements have already been called; there is no need to attack pointlessly. Focus on self-defense until backup arrives,” Pujol commanded.

“Sir!”

“Understood!”

The general’s men were the elite. Not a single soldier panicked in the face of the assault as they formed a circular wall of shields and spears in the middle of the road per the general’s instructions while the archers readied their bows.

Naturally, they could not expect the archers to be as effective as before given their current numbers, so the shielders and spearmen would have something to do. The reduced numbers also meant that the defensive line was smaller and closer to the dash drakes, so they might not remain under control, and the archers dismounted as well.

The operation developed as the theory said it would—the soldiers with large

wooden shields stopped the attack, and spearmen stabbed out from the gaps in the wall, allowing the archers to fire from behind them as they lowered their heads. Over and over the pattern repeated.

The elite squad's movements were magnificent, and there was no real risk to simply watching, so Pujol had done very little other than giving the initial orders.

That said, it was not likely the entire battle would take place without a single error from the squad.

“Kshhaa!”

“Agh?”

One of the spearmen had been unlucky with his thrust and caught a raptor as it tossed its head. His grip had been too light as well, and the spear went spinning through the air towards the middle of the formation.

Elite though the group may have been, the most that each individual could do was fulfill their own role. They would be unable to escape disaster. Just as harm seemed inevitable, the general released a yell from where he had been watching. He had leaped into the air, grabbing the spear flying through the sky with his bare hands. His movements didn't stop there either.

“Hrah!” he grunted as he reversed the spear while still airborne before launching it blisteringly fast outside of the circle at the raptors.



“Gyah?!”

The thrown spear blasted through the raptor’s skull and embedded itself into the ground.

“Gr-gr-gree!”

Of course, swarm raptors had tiny brains, so even a direct strike through the skull was not certain death on many occasions. For better or worse, this raptor was one of those examples. However, the spear must have stabbed through it with astounding force, as no matter how frantically it thrashed, the shaft showed no sign of shifting.

While they were aware of their commander’s prowess, seeing it again caused the soldiers to forget their place, all of them coming to a stop for a moment.

“Eyes up,” Pujol said shortly, dispelling the trance instantly.

“S-Sir!”

In the end, the squad fought on without a single casualty until their reinforcements answered the call. Things went completely according to plan: they lured out the raptors, killed a fair number of them, and reunited safely. The result was favorable at a glance, but Pujol’s expression didn’t soften.

“General Pujol, the road is nearly clear. We should be able to resume the march as planned.”

“I see. Good work, Lord Xavier.”

Xavier had almost ended up in an adjutant’s position, and his report garnered a brief acknowledgment from the general.

“Is something wrong, General?” he asked, spotting the strangeness in the older man’s demeanor.

“Lord Xavier?” Pujol asked in turn, his thick eyebrows creasing.

“Yes?”

“You and your men have fought these raptors before, correct?”

Xavier wasn’t sure of the thrust of the question but had no real need to hide it, so he answered truthfully even as he mentally wondered about the veteran’s

aim in asking.

“We did. We were ambushed but managed to repel them with minimal injuries.”

“How many did you kill?”

“Ah, I believe it was five.”

The general nodded several times, the answer being much as he had expected. “The group that attacked you was approximately fifty strong, no?”

“It was. The majority hid in the trees and we were attacked from our flank, so I cannot give an exact number, but my subordinates’ reports are all around that number.”

“Then do you remember how many there were as we delivered the salt? The leader was the same huge swarm raptor, incidentally.”

“I do. Around fifty,” Xavier answered, a vague idea of the reason for the general’s frown forming as he did.

Seeing the unease spread on Xavier’s face, Pujol continued. “We killed fourteen, then. Today was the third attack, and the number of raptors was...approximately fifty.”

His squad had killed four of them, but that number wasn’t important now. Xavier was silent. The problem was that there were about fifty that had attacked them. This was the third attack. The first had consisted of around fifty and five had been killed. The second had also consisted of around fifty, and fourteen had been killed.

That much was fine; they hadn’t got an accurate count in the first place, so if there had been, say, fifty-five then killing five of them and being attacked by fifty once more would follow.

However, this third assault was again carried out by around fifty raptors, which didn’t add up. Even if there had been fifty-five initially, and fifty the second time, there would have been thirty-six at the third encounter. It was impossible to mistake that for “around fifty.”

“The beast likely commands far in excess of a mere fifty raptors. Fifty is most

probably a suitable number to hunt with. The fact that none of the raptors are juveniles bears that out. I'll wager that there are no females either."

Xavier understood the implication and gulped. "So how many do you estimate, General?"

The other man shrugged in answer. "Who knows? I doubt it is fewer than a hundred, but it could be two hundred, three, or even five hundred of them. The worst part is that it keeps so many in reserve while attacking with only fifty drakes. We may have made them even warier with our counterattack this time as well."

"They won't come out, so we will have to hunt them through the mountains..."

"Indeed. The Drake Marksmen are well trained, but we lack the numbers. I had thought we would be a sufficient number to deal with fifty, even in the mountains, but it appears I was naive. We will have to retreat and request reinforcements from the capital," he stated, easily voicing the conclusion that the young lord could not.

"A-Are you certain?"

Requesting reinforcements was essentially admitting that the situation was more than you could deal with. Xavier had thought it might be humiliating for a man of the general's standing, being renowned as a general and a hero in the war, but Pujol looked completely at ease.

"Fulfilling my duty and keeping casualties down is more important than my pride or fame," he answered plainly.

Xavier felt his respect grow at that, but there was a reason for the general's unshaken state. Queen Aura was the one who would evaluate the success of the expedition. She was most wary of human casualties. Which meant that however much fruit the battle bore, losing the elite Drake Marksmen would hardly lead to a good evaluation.

However, calling for reinforcements when necessary to keep losses to a minimum would mean that their accomplishments would not be overlooked, even if it strained the treasury.

Aura and Pujol were at loggerheads for control of the army, but they were also the leader and subordinate of the army that supported the country. If he provided results that were in the interest of the nation, then whatever the queen thought, she would reward him appropriately. She was “reliable” in that way as his liege.

The best result would be to discover the cause of this abnormality and cut it off at the source. The second best would be to create tactics such that even squads of general soldiers can deal with large-scale outbreaks like this. Exterminating the creatures with my own men would be the absolute minimum, and that is hardly worth mentioning.

“Men, continue for now. We will return to the fort at the border of the royal territories. I will send a wyvern to the palace and await reinforcements,” he commanded, not revealing any of his inner thoughts.

Chapter 4 — Prince's Secrets Revealed, and Prince's Secrets Exposed

Time went by, then the hottest, harshest season in Capua finally passed.

The inner palace was currently engulfed in a previously unseen tension. Aura had postponed her morning duties, and Zenjirou had canceled all of his plans for the day, quite ready to remain right where he was. Both of them could barely breathe as they waited.

The maids in the room had grown close to their master and mistress over the year and change since Zenjirou's arrival, but they were unable to so much as fulfill their usual duties of serving tea, let alone talk casually with their lord as they stood stiffly along the walls.

The prickling silence continued until a knock came at the door.

Zenjirou started.

"Enter!" called Aura, her voice like the sharp crack of a whip, prompting the person at the door to do exactly that.

"Excuse me," said the older man, not flinching at her tone as he entered. He had long hair that was flecked with white and similarly colored facial hair. He wore a long white piece of clothing. It was the royal physician, Michel.

Michel closed the door behind him and stayed by it without approaching the royal couple. The lack of rebuke from Aura or Zenjirou indicated that this had been prearranged as the doctor looked evenly between the two of them, the pair gazing at him intensely.

"To begin with the diagnosis, Prince Carlos is suffering from red-splotch fever," he said bluntly, offering the facts.

Naturally, the first to notice that something was amiss with the kingdom's first prince was his wet nurse, Cassandra. It was normal for him to cry at dawn, but his cries had been different that night. Cassandra was an accomplished wet

nurse and able to tell, based entirely on the sounds of Carlos's cries, whether he needed feeding, changing, or was simply unsettled.

His cries had been shriller than usual, yet also weaker, so Cassandra had immediately roused the sleeping maids and sent one apiece to alert Aura and Michel.

The name of the disease told Zenjirou nothing, so the nervous expression remained on his face as he questioned the physician. "Doctor, what is this red-splotch fever?"

"As the name implies, the disease causes a fever while also causing the patient to break out in red spots over their face and body. The hives are merely a visual symptom and cause no pain or itching, but the disease leads to a relatively long and high fever and swelling of the throat. The fever usually lasts for around three days. Generally, healthy adults are unlikely to lose their life if they rest and stay well-nourished; however, it is not uncommon for less resilient infants and the elderly to succumb."

Understanding, Zenjirou rubbed his suddenly numb fingers together on the sofa. "So it is life and death for Zenkichi?"

"Fortunately, Prince Carlos has been well provided for until now and is growing well. He is blessed with resilience for an infant, so I do not believe the situation to be quite so dire. I would give him a ninety percent chance."

Zenjirou let out a sigh of relief at that, but Aura's severe expression didn't ease from where she sat next to him.

"Zenjirou, Doctor Michel means exactly what he said. To put it another way, if ten patients were in the same condition and circumstances, one of them would die."

"Ah..." he managed, lost for words.

The other side to a ninety percent survival rate was a ten percent death rate. From that perspective, he couldn't be optimistic at all. There likely weren't many parents who would be able to stay objective in such a situation. Zenjirou, of course, was not one of them, and he strained his frazzled brain in search of a solution.

“Then we can use a healing stone!”

Magic tools that could heal all kinds of injuries or illnesses in an instant. Zenjirou leaped at the chance as soon as it came to mind, but the *queen’s* response was not as eager. She bit her lip with a hard expression before replying.

“That is a difficult proposition. We currently have only three healing stones and no way of knowing if or when we will gain a fourth. The reaction from the nobles, if we were to use one of those precious stones for a child with a ninety percent chance of survival, would be extreme.”

“Zenkichi is the first prince, though, isn’t he?!” Zenjirou demanded, growing unusually enraged by her emotionless words. “Are you saying that damn stone is worth more than the life of the only heir to the throne?!”

Aura looked briefly pained upon hearing him snap at her for the first time since they met before her “queen’s face” resurfaced and she explained.

“Carlos is indeed one of the most important people in the country, but he is not someone who would have an immediate impact on the kingdom if he were to pass away.”

Zenjirou drew in a quick breath, but Michel’s calm voice interrupted before he could say anything.

“Sir Zenjirou, this will sound extremely blunt, but in this country, it is the norm for even the children of high-ranking nobles to be this ill four or five times before they reach the age of ten.”

“Four or five?” he asked, the clear, heartless numbers dousing his burning anger.

The kingdom had three stones, and Carlos would be, on average, as ill as he currently was four or five times during his childhood. The numbers just didn’t add up.

Of course, he and Aura intended to have more children, so the harsh reality was that they didn’t have enough stones to use that precious last resort on something of this severity—a fact that Zenjirou gradually came to understand.

“Sorry...I lost my head a little.”

Aura simply replied, “No matter,” as she saw him slump back against the sofa.

Truthfully, if not for Zenjirou, Aura might have used one of the stones on Carlos herself. She was the person in the kingdom with the strongest ties to the royal bloodline, but she was a woman. There was a hard limit on the number of children a woman could bring into the world during her lifetime. Furthermore, the risks of birth were far from mitigated in this world, and it was certainly possible that a woman could become incapable of carrying a pregnancy to term after her first child.

Zenjirou, however, had strong bloodline ties in addition to being a grown man, immediately canceling out the objective irreplaceability of that child. He had already proven that he was fertile by conceiving Carlos. In extreme cases, nobles without an emotional attachment to the prince would likely offer brief condolences before simply wishing him luck with the next child.

Conversely, if Zenjirou had been equally ill, the nobles would likely advocate for the stone’s use. The well-educated were aware of the fact that even if a man survived the long fever, it might have an impact on his fertility. It was a ruthless outlook, but from the perspective of Capua’s national interest, Carlos’s life weighed lighter on the scales than Zenjirou’s seed.

But Aura could never tell him that and instead remained silent. Her husband, meanwhile, had calmed down, but it didn’t necessarily follow that he would have any good alternatives to suggest.

“What about getting a healer from the Gilbelle family?”

“I am currently the only one capable of using teleportation magic, so that would require me to go to the Twin Kingdoms alone.”

“Is there a specialist in red-splotch fever there?”

“You do Doctor Michel a disservice. He is the preeminent physician in the country. Finding someone more skilled in any sphere of medicine is not a simple task.”

“And obviously, there’s no medicine that’s particularly effective on it?”
Zenjirou asked.

“If there was, we would be using it.”

“Yeah, figures...”

The few ideas Zenjirou could think of were immediately cut down by the queen, and the room fell into a depressed silence. There was nothing to be done.

Actually, it would have been better if that were true. More accurately, he could have given up if they had nothing but the option of the healing stone, but local politics stayed their hand.

So, this is what it means to be royalty, Zenjirou thought, truly feeling the gravity of the position he was in for the first time.

If he persisted in his selfishness, he could likely force the use of the stone, but that would lead to a backlash from the nobility and scorn from foreign royals. If those sentiments were directed solely at Zenjirou, it would perhaps even be a desirable outcome, but the negativity was also liable to spread to Aura for failing to stop him in her role as queen.

Regardless, the guilt of allowing political reasons to get in the way of giving his child all the help he could when the boy was fighting for his life wouldn't subside, and he felt like it meant he didn't love Zenkichi enough.

“It would have been less dire if he had contracted the Blessing of the Forest first. Your Majesty, do you know of anyone who currently has the disease?” Michel asked, changing the subject slightly to draw attention away from the worst-case scenario.

“I do not,” Aura answered, taking advantage of the change of topic. “There is currently no one with the disease who can enter the inner palace.”

The Blessing of the Forest was an endemic disease that Zenjirou had already contracted. The name was no metaphor; it was a disease that a person only caught once in their life, and as long as there were no complications, it was rarely fatal. Contracting the disease also provided the patient with antibodies that offered a level of effectiveness against all diseases—something that made it best described as an all-purpose prophylactic.

Weak infants lost their lives to the illness on a fairly regular basis, but

considering what health concerns they would face later in life, it was far better for their chances if they caught it early on. Aura had planned to have a trustworthy noble girl with the disease pass it on to Carlos but had not had the opportunity before he contracted the red-splotch fever.

A heavy silence reigned once more. There was nothing she could do for her child, and with her duties as queen, she could not personally tend to him either. The monarch was not allowed to come into contact with a patient suffering from a contagious illness.

Knowing that, Aura let out a sigh and stood energetically. "Right, Doctor Michel, I entrust Carlos's care to you and Cassandra. Late though I may be, I have a meeting I must attend. I am confident in your abilities; do your best."

"Of course, I will do all that is in my power."

The doctor gave her a bow, his calm demeanor never changing, and Aura's gaze moved to her husband, who was looking up at her from his place on the sofa.

"Zenjirou, what of you?"

Her husband remained seated and thought it over for a while. "Today's a write-off. I know that I'm no use here, but I'm in no mental state to work in the palace; I'd probably screw something up entirely."

"I see. Your duties are nothing to strain yourself over, so very well. However, you must not visit Carlos in person, is that understood?" she warned.

"Yeah, I get it."

Zenjirou was a healthy adult and had already had the Blessing of the Forest, so there was no real danger even if he caught the fever, but it would still lead to him being bedridden for two or three days, and that bed was one he shared with Aura. The disease could pass from Carlos to Zenjirou, and then on to Aura from there, and the country would be unable to function without its monarch, even if it was only for a short time.

"The words may be of little comfort, but do not let it weigh too heavily on you," Aura told him before walking off briskly as if to give an example of her words as she left the inner palace.



“Ugh...grghh...!”

Having been left alone in the living room, Zenjirou was putting his self-directed anger into practicing magic. The focus of his practice was on controlling his mana—something he’d grown more capable at as of late. The skill was indispensable for a range of spells.

If he could use teleportation magic, perhaps he could have gone to the Twin Kingdoms for a healer himself. The idea spurred him on.

Of course, even if he was capable of such a feat, it was unlikely he would have been allowed to spend so much mana on summoning a healer for something with a ninety percent survival rate.

“Phew... Guh...”

The exercise was not one that usually used physical stamina, so it wouldn’t normally be so tiring. Zenjirou hadn’t quite gotten the knack yet, though, so he was tensing up pointlessly. That tensing meant his body had gradually become quite sweaty.

Yet no matter what he did, he couldn’t shake the image of his beloved son suffering from that illness, so his concentration was shot, and he wasn’t getting anything out of the exercise.

“Argh, fuck!”

Resorting to profanity wasn’t something he often did, but Zenjirou shook off some of the sweat and stood up from the sofa, heading for the fridge by the wall. He poured a glass of water and quickly drained it.

“This is all pointless,” he lamented.

Magic did often require concentration to practice, so considering he currently couldn’t bring any of that concentration to bear, it was true that he was getting nothing out of it.

“Aura said not to let it weigh too heavily, but that’s easier said than done...”

He genuinely admired her for being able to act like nothing was wrong when she was probably just as worried as he was inside.

“Would I have been the same if I had gotten married in Japan and had a kid there?” he mused idly as he returned to his seat.

If so, it would have been a rather severe shortcoming as far as his job went. Of course, he trusted modern Japanese medical institutions far more, so he might have been able to relax and leave things to the doctors back home.

“Argh, this is no good; let’s game for a bit.”

His thoughts kept turning to his son no matter what he did. He pulled out the console from where it had been for a while to try and distract himself and had just connected it when there was a sudden knock at the door.

“Excuse me, Sir Zenjirou,” came the familiar voice of one of the maids.

“Go ahead and come in,” he answered instinctively, but doubtful at the same time.

What had happened? It was still too early for lunch, and the maids knew that he wasn’t fond of them entering the room while he was inside, so there must have been a specific reason.

Maybe something happened to Zenkichi?

It was hardly surprising that his thoughts started spiraling downward, considering the situation.

The woman who entered was the middle-aged head maid, Amanda, wearing her dark red uniform neatly. Zenjirou’s nerves ratcheted up even more, since for her to personally come there meant it was no trivial matter.

Whether she was aware of his worries or not, she gave an almost ceremonially perfect bow before beginning to speak dispassionately.

“Sir Zenjirou, a message from Sir Fabio arrived recently. It would appear that Prince Francesco of the Twin Kingdoms has expressed a desire to visit Prince Carlos.”

“What?” Zenjirou managed dully, not expecting the conversation to go in that direction.

After several moments, the actual meaning of the words penetrated his mind, and he waved a hand in front of his face to dismiss it.

“No way, that ain’t happening. Making Zenkichi meet a foreign royal while he’s ill won’t do any good for anyone. Besides, I could understand Princess Bona making the request, but Prince Francesco can’t because of the ban on men, right? What, does he want us to drag our son out of the inner palace?”

After that purely emotional reaction, Zenjirou had a sudden realization. This absurd suggestion had been brought to him by Fabio. As one would expect, Amanda had simply let his words so far wash over her before continuing her report.

“From what I understand, Prince Francesco was given a number of healing stones by the Gilbelle family in case of any emergency while he was here. If he is allowed to visit the prince, he intends to use one on Prince Carlos.”

Zenjirou choked before giving a dramatic yell. “I’ll see him right away! I’m going to the palace, so get my clothes ready!”

“At once. Please proceed to the next room; everything is ready there,” she answered her overexcited master calmly.



Having rushed to change his clothes, Zenjirou did his best to suppress the urge to sprint as he strode through the corridors of the royal palace, but when he entered the room, Francesco and Aura were already there talking.

“Ah, you are here, Zenjirou,” Aura said, pausing their conversation to greet him.

“Good day, Your Majesty,” Francesco added. “My apologies for starting without you.”

Zenjirou was startled by Aura’s presence for a moment, but it wasn’t surprising after some thought. Zenjirou alone could do nothing to allow the prince access to the inner palace, nor to receive the healing stone. When Fabio contacted Zenjirou, he would have certainly contacted Aura as well.

Immediately reaching that conclusion, Zenjirou offered a brief apology for his tardiness and sat down next to Aura. This was a conversation between a foreign prince and the reigning queen and her consort. Ordinarily, despite the urgency and unofficial nature of it, there would have been some small talk around the

season and such, but Zenjirou didn't have the composure to bother with any of that at the moment, and Francesco was not so invested in the formalities.

"Your Majesty, I am glad you could come, and I apologize for the suddenness," the foreign prince said with his usual innocent smile and easy tone.

"Not at all," Zenjirou answered before asking about the thing that was most weighing on his mind. "It is a worthwhile cause to meet about. Incidentally, I do not see Princess Bona. Where is she?"

Francesco's expression grew slightly awkward as he answered, "I kept it a secret. It would just be a hassle if I told her."

Zenjirou and Aura answered in turn.

"I can see that."

"I suppose that would be the case."

It seemed all too likely that Bona, as serious and diligent as she was, would not be willing to turn over a healing stone. She and her companion were in a foreign country, and Francesco was being rash by so readily offering their hosts one of his lifelines. Bona was sensible enough she would stop him if she caught wind of it.

That said, Zenjirou and Aura would both rather have dealt with Francesco's rashness, so it was somewhat fortunate that the more logical of the two wasn't present.

They quickly exchanged glances to make sure they were on the same page.

"In that case, there is no need to go out of our way to summon Princess Bona."

"Indeed, I imagine she is rather busy."

Thus, Bona's non-involvement was decided quickly.

"So, Prince Francesco," Aura continued with a calm expression, "I have heard you are willing to provide us with a healing stone."

Despite the look on her face, she had made no allowances with her mental

state and moved smoothly to the main topic.

Francesco replied at once. "I am. I brought one with me. Please take a look," he answered, pulling a palm-sized stone from his pocket and placing it on the table.

It was a cuboid with rounded corners, finely carved, and a slight marbling pattern on its clean white surface, but the actual item was probably close to worthless. However, anyone who could see mana would be able to observe that the stone was giving off as much mana as the average mage.

"And you will give us this?" Aura asked cautiously, as the prince had not mentioned compensation but had instead taken the item out immediately.

Thus far, the young man had been quite free with classified information concerning the marbles to an extent that could only be called foolish, but that didn't necessarily mean he would seek no compensation here.

His response was far from what Aura had expected, though. "No, I won't turn it over to you; I will take it and use it on Prince Carlos, so I would like permission to visit him."

He sought no compensation but required a visit with the prince, as he would be using the tool personally. If Aura had seen nothing suspicious in this, she would have been negligent as both a mother and a queen. Francesco's request was extremely suspicious, and she probed deeper.

"Why? I am sure the stone is important to you, so I wish to know the reason behind your suggestion."

"Ah, well, I guess I feel a kinship with Prince Carlos. Besides, I'm from the Twin Kingdoms and in a position where I can get the healing stones more easily than most. So just using one isn't a problem."

The word "kinship" lingered in Zenjirou's mind as he sat to the side, watching the prince speak with an absent-minded expression.

Huh, I think he said something similar before... Right, when we met at that ball. He said he felt the same about me.

The prince felt a kinship with both Carlos and his father. Was that something

he could let go as just a simple turn of phrase? Zenjirou decided to check with Aura later as the conversation continued.

“So it is entirely a suggestion from the heart?” Aura asked.

“Indeed. If I can free Prince Carlos from his suffering, nothing would please me more.”

“In that case, there is no need for you to use the stone personally, is there? If you wish to meet him, we can bring him along to the royal palace once he has recovered.”

“Ah, that won’t work. Forgive my rudeness, but a healing stone is a precious commodity. While Prince Carlos may be your first prince, there is no guarantee you will use it on him, is there?”

It was put a little too bluntly, but what he was saying was understandable. If they looked at things from a purely calculative perspective, they could get a lot out of the situation if they took the healing stone, lied about using it, and simply bet on the infant’s ninety percent chance of survival.

Of course, if the ten percent chance ended up bearing out, they would lose both their first prince and the Twin Kingdoms’ trust, so it wasn’t an option they were likely to take. However, the concern Francesco displayed in his words was understandable from a foreign royal’s perspective.

Whatever else happens, this tells us one thing. Francesco is definitely not an idiot. It’s just an act, Zenjirou concluded, keeping his cool as he watched the two from the side. The man’s usual stupidity *had* to be theater, but why would he abandon the veneer he used to trick even his own countrymen just for a meeting with Carlos?

“What do you say? I really will be satisfied with the visit. I won’t bring anything but the healing stone, of course, and I don’t mind being alone. If it requires a search then I’ll be willing to undergo that too,” he offered, making every other allowance as Aura hesitated.

“Hrmm...”

His insistence suggested to Aura that he must have had some major goal behind his desire to visit her son.

“Please, I vow I will do nothing to harm either you or your country,” Francesco pleaded, holding his right hand up in front of his face entreatingly. The sight was amusing, but the actual events were far less so.

Still, in the short term, taking Francesco into the inner palace under such strict conditions meant he could pose no threat while there. With no weapons, no attendants, the second that he tried something, they could easily take him down.

Francesco’s bearing made it obvious that he had received very little in the way of martial training. He was relatively tall and fairly well built, but even Aura on her own could probably get him under control with little effort if she tried.

And above all else, Aura was a mother. From that position, she could not let the chance to use a healing stone on her child slip through her fingers.

“Very well,” she yielded after a long pause. “The visit and healing will be conducted under the same rules that medics and the healers of the Gilbelle family may enter under, and you will be allowed access to the inner palace. Dealing with the aftermath if it is later discovered that you were invited inside in secret would be bothersome, so I will make public the reason you are entering. Are you willing to abide by this?”

“I am; thank you very much,” Francesco answered with a satisfied smile.



An hour later found Zenjirou, Aura, and the visiting prince walking through the corridors of the inner palace. Francesco had been searched before they entered, and everything but the healing stone had been taken from him. Conversely, Aura and Zenjirou both had short swords hanging from their waists—something they normally never bothered with.

While Zenjirou wielding a blade was not much of a threat, Aura was as proficient as the average knight. Regardless of his build, Francesco was uninitiated in martial arts, so dealing with him on his own would be no issue.

That said, the prince’s goal in gaining entrance to the inner palace remained unclear, so they were still feeling somewhat uneasy about it.

Aura had originally intended to have an escort accompany them into the

palace, but after considering the risks, pros, and cons, had decided not to. Allowing him entry in the first place was a show of trust to some degree. While she and Zenjirou being armed was one thing, allowing armed soldiers in—in defiance of the usual allowances—would be another and would show that they didn't trust his statements.

“Huh,” Francesco marveled, “it’s pretty different from our inner palace. Of course, I only remember it vaguely from before I was six, so I can’t say for sure, aha ha.”

He looked just like a tourist as he swiveled his head to look interestedly around while they walked, showing no sign of any tension. He was acting like enough of an idiot that it made the thought of him actually being that stupid pass through Zenjirou’s mind again.

Finally, they reached Carlos’s bedchamber.

“It is me,” Aura said with no fanfare, having already sent word of the circumstances.

The door opened from the inside with no real sign of surprise. “Your Majesty, Sir Zenjirou, Prince Francesco,” the blonde maid greeted them with a respectful bow. “Doctor Michel and Ma’am Cassandra are waiting inside.”

Another maid had been nursing the prince until just a little earlier, but Aura had given the blonde an order to relieve her when she brought the news. This maid was one of Aura’s confidants, on the same level as Fabio and Espiridion. She might not have looked it, but she was one of only two inner palace maids who possessed direct combat skills.

“Good work,” Aura told her. “How is he?”

“He settled down a few moments ago. His throat seems to be causing him pain, and he was crying while he was awake.”

“I see...” Aura replied, biting her lip hard as she entered the room.

Francesco followed her, and Zenjirou brought up the rear. Aura had told her husband not to hesitate if the worst came to pass and Francesco tried anything.

Their beloved son was sleeping on a small bed in the room, and standing on

either side were his wet nurse—Cassandra—and Doctor Michel. In contrast to Cassandra, who bent her plump body into a deep bow, Michel shot an intense look at Aura and Zenjirou.

“Your Majesty, sir, I have heard the circumstances. However, if you will permit me to say so, I think this is rash. Red-splotch fever is not a disease you can catch only once. I am sure the two of you were forbidden entry until I permitted it.”

Zenjirou reflexively shrank back at the aging doctor’s glare, and Aura seemed to do the same.

“I apologize, but the situation has changed, forgive me,” she said apologetically.

The doctor seemed to realize that further preaching would have no benefit, and he sighed gustily before backing off. “I assume that you are Prince Francesco? You have brought the healing stone for Prince Carlos?”

Michel was a mere doctor, and his conversation partner was royalty. Ordinarily, it would have been an extremely rude interaction, but he was there as Carlos’s attending physician. When it came to anything relating to his charge’s health, Michel had significantly stronger standing.

“Yeah, that’s right. Here it is,” the visiting royal answered unconcernedly as he lifted the white stone in his hand, either because the custom was the same in the Twin Kingdoms or simply because it didn’t bother him.

Seeing the waves of mana emanating from the stone, Michel’s expression finally relaxed a bit. “I see. The prince is stable for now, but a quicker recovery is nothing to reject. Unlike the Blessing of the Forest, there is no benefit to overcoming it on your own.”

While the doctor had thus far shown no signs of unease, he had been entrusted with the life of the first prince as the child suffered from a disease that killed one in ten people, so it must have been a fair amount of pressure. His face shifted to display a clear impression of relief.

Francesco’s smile didn’t falter as he took a step towards the small bed where the prince was resting.

“Yeah, leave it to me; I’ll make sure he’s cured,” he declared, thumping his

empty hand against his chest.

“Prince Francesco, pardon my hurrying, but if you would begin...” Aura pressed bluntly, holding her position from where she could interpose herself between the princes if need be.

Francesco gave another nod before saying something utterly inexcusable in a perfectly even tone. “I will. There is something I need to apologize for first, though.”

“Apologize?” Aura asked dangerously, her entire body coiling like a spring.

Behind them, Zenjirou reflexively put a hand on his blade. With smooth motions, the blonde maid moved so that she could easily remove the blade she always carried strapped to her thigh.

With a sideways glance at Michel as the doctor gasped, watching the situation unfold, Francesco continued with the smile on his face. “Indeed, I have actually told a lie. I said that I have several healing stones because I am from the Twin Kingdoms, but that was false. We have the Gilbelle family of healers, and our own family never leaves the country, so if we were to be wounded, we could immediately acquire a healer, which means there aren’t many healing stones specifically for royalty.”

“Then what is that white stone? Something other than a healing stone?” Aura asked sharply, her voice sounding like a bared blade.

Their visitor’s smile didn’t falter as he answered brightly. “No, it certainly is a healing stone. I only have the one, though, and Bona would be rather angry with me if I used it.”

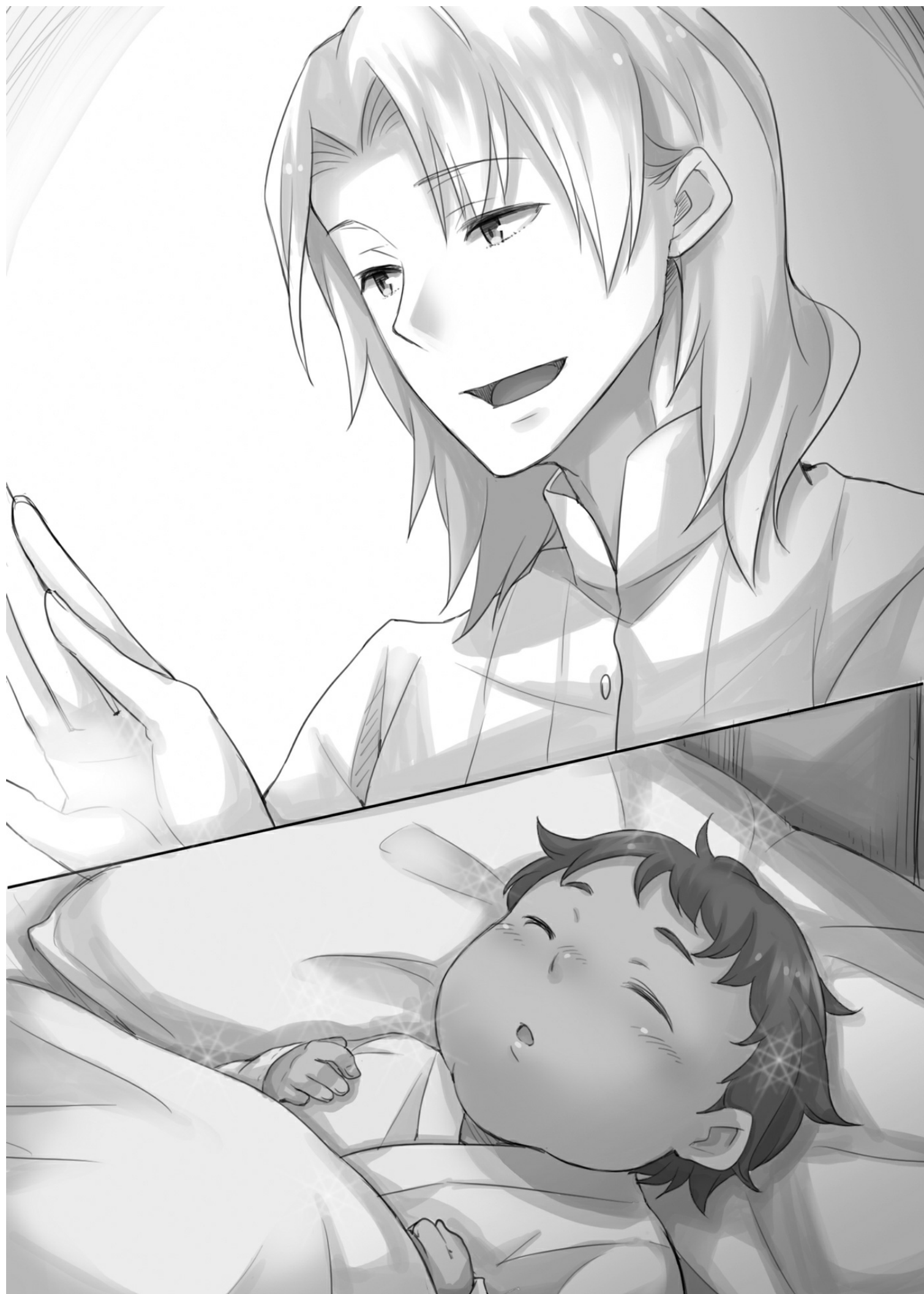
“Then what is your intention here?” the queen demanded, lowering her center of gravity and keeping her hand on the hilt of her sword, sparing Zenjirou a glance to tell him not to rush things.

Francesco’s actions were certainly suspicious, but it was even stranger for him to have come this far to harm Carlos. He may not have been in line for the throne, but Francesco was still one of the Twin Kingdoms’ best enchanters, so it would have been a waste to use him as a sacrificial piece. With that in mind, it was possible that his goal was not to harm Carlos.

In the midst of the rising tension, Francesco reached a hand out over the sleeping baby. Not his right hand with the healing stone, but his empty left hand.

“I will do this. *May this child’s afflictions be purged! I yield two hundred and eighty-six offerings of mana unto the spirits of life!*” he chanted.

A faint glow of mana shone down on Carlos from the prince’s hand. The result was astonishing. The red-splotch fever, as the name suggested, left red markings all over the face and body. Until that moment, Carlos’s adorable visage had been covered in a heartbreaking number of them, but now they had completely vanished. If they had strained their ears, they would have heard that even his labored breathing had smoothed out. The effect of the prince’s spell was clear in an instant.



“Healing magic...” Zenjirou breathed after a long moment, finally understanding what he had witnessed.

“It cannot be!” Aura exclaimed, showing more surprise than Zenjirou had ever seen from her before. Her shock was to be expected. Francesco was a Sharou, but he had used the lineal magic of the Gilbelle family—something close to impossible by the rules of their world.

“Umm, could I explain the details somewhere else? Ah, it needs secrecy, though, so could you order everyone here to keep that to themselves?” he asked, as at-ease as ever.



“The only people there other than ourselves were Doctor Michel, Cassandra, and Margarete. They have been ordered to remain in the room for the time being. While I do not mean to cast aspersions on the efficacy of your magic, we cannot leave an infant alone in his convalescence, so they will look after him. Also, while he was ill, I gave an order that no one was to approach his room, so they will have no contact with anyone else. That should suffice for now.”

“Thank you, Queen Aura. I appreciate your consideration.”

The three of them had relocated to somewhere they could sit and talk. The room was the one that Zenjirou normally used for his lessons with Octavia. There was nothing he had brought from Earth there, and it was already prepared to receive guests, so it was the ideal place.

Aura and Francesco were seated on either side of the table, and Zenjirou was next to Aura—all their usual placements. The passing time and change of location had allowed Aura to regain her cool.

“Then let us begin. There is much I wish to say, but I will start with a direct question. Prince Francesco, who are you?”

The question was perhaps too direct, and Francesco was somewhat lost for an answer, giving an awkward smile as he scratched at his head. “I don’t know what to tell you. I am Francesco, the first son of the first prince of the Sharou family, Giuseppe; no one else.”

“Hmm, perhaps I was too vague. I shall ask each thing individually. Are you not a member of the Sharou family? No, that cannot be right; I have seen you using enchantment magic on a daily basis to create an item with future compensation. In that case, are you truly able to use healing magic as well? There was no sleight of hand?”

Aura’s questioning and tone were a little harsh for someone who had just healed her child and was also a prince of another country. But the events they had witnessed were so incomprehensible that the questions had to be asked.

Francesco himself seemed to realize it as well and showed no sign of displeasure as he answered. “It was not a trick. The magic was indeed healing magic. I can use both healing magic and enchantment.” His tone was stressing that it was an amazing feat as he spoke happily.

“Amazing” was an insufficient word, though, even as an understatement. It was then that Zenjirou decided to ask something that had been weighing on his mind for a while.

“Prince Francesco, you said you felt a kinship to me at the banquet, did you not? And you said the same about my son, Zenkichi. Answer truthfully: is that ‘kinship’ related to carrying the blood of two royal lines?”

Francesco blinked in slight surprise at the question before answering with a grin.

“Wow, you remembered. That’s exactly right. Just as you, Your Majesty, and Prince Carlos carry the blood of the Capua and Sharou families, I carry the blood of the Sharou and Gilbelle families.”

Zenjirou and Aura were struck speechless by Francesco’s easy admission. It certainly solved at least one mystery, though. Researchers of magic had hypothesized that a royal with two bloodlines and more mana than average would be able to use both lineal magics. Francesco had roughly double the mana of Zenjirou, so if he had the bloodlines of both royal families rather than just the Sharou blood, it followed that he could use both types of magic.

“Then your parents...” Zenjirou began, hesitant to suggest anything that would impugn their honor. Francesco’s answer, however, was not something he had expected.

“Not at all; my parents are most definitely First Prince Giuseppe and his consort, Tosca.”

“What? Then how?”

The prince’s smile was strained as he explained. “Your Highness, the Twin Kingdoms have had two royal families for centuries. Do you think so much time has passed without crossing the lines even once?”

It wasn’t Zenjirou who replied to the question, but Aura at his side. “I see, so from a certain perspective, you are the same as Princess Bona.”

“I am indeed.”

Bona, despite being born as a completely normal, low-class noble, had had the bloodline of the Sharou family lurking in her veins awakened. Likewise, despite being born legitimately to the Sharou family, Francesco had awoken the blood of the Gilbelle family lurking in *his* veins. One could most definitely call their positions similar.

“So, is that also the reason you have no right to succession despite descending directly from the first prince?” Aura asked with narrowed eyes.

Francesco’s smile remained in place but took on an air of tension as he confirmed her suspicions. “There is a secret agreement between the Sharou and Gilbelle families. It states that anyone who manifests the power of both bloodlines will remain celibate for their entire lives, bringing an end to their bloodline.”

The contract was, in all likelihood, to protect the claim that each of the families had on their own lineal magics. If the requirements were not met, it would have been rather difficult for their joint kingdom, with two rulers in command, to persist for long.

Yet however he glossed over it, it must have been rather unfair from Francesco’s point of view. Perhaps his constant innocent smile was to hide those gloomy thoughts, and with that in mind, Aura questioned him further.

“Then is your normal behavior a front for that? Perhaps some kind of act that the public can accept as the reason you lack a place in the line of succession? Since you cannot publicly state the true reason...”

Perhaps Francesco also felt a kinship to Zenjirou because of his need to purposely play the slothful fool to maintain the stability of the country, sacrificing his own image to do so.

But despite her conclusion, Francesco shook his head. “No, it’s truly how I am. I’m not too intelligent, and I always act before I think. I just say what I like without worrying about it, and do what I like the same way. The only time I act with the patience I was taught is times like this.”

“I see.”

Aura smiled ruefully at his words. The very fact that he *could* behave with that type of patience demonstrated that he wasn’t an idiot, but he probably wouldn’t make that connection. She imagined it would be rather difficult to overcome someone’s lifelong self-assessment based on the words of a third party.

Still, it did more or less explain why his act of stupidity came across as so natural. The only question left now was a big one. Frankly, she could imagine his answer, but it still needed to be asked.

Aura straightened her back and took a deep breath. Then, with an easy tone, she asked, almost mulling over the words as they left her mouth.

“Then my final question, Prince Francesco, is this: why did you reveal this to us? Further, what was the reason for your scheme to enter the inner palace and heal our son to provide incontrovertible proof that you could use healing magic? I presume that no one in the Twin Kingdoms knows this, and it is completely classified?”

Francesco straightened as well, almost in answer to Aura’s movements. Then the smile on his face became almost transparent, far from his usual innocent expression.

“Yes, the only people who know are His Majesty the king, His Excellency the pope, my parents, and my teacher of healing magic. Ah, Bona doesn’t know at all, so please keep that a secret from her too. The reason I revealed it was because I wanted both of you to know that someone with about the same level of mana as me, and two royal bloodlines, can use both families’ magic.”

At that answer, which was exactly what she had expected, Aura couldn't help but close her eyes and remain silent.

"So you mean..." Zenjirou said, coming to the same conclusion as his wife a moment later, but not finishing the thought. He couldn't hide his surprise and his vision swam.

When he looked at Aura, she nodded resolutely and answered quietly. "Indeed, our Carlos will be able to use both space-time magic and enchantment. Is that correct, Prince Francesco?"

Carlos's mana capacity was on par with Francesco's, and if the latter's explanation was correct, such an outcome was inevitable.

"It is," he answered shortly, his voice lingering in Zenjirou's ears.

Chapter 5 — A Goal Confirmed

Immediately afterwards, Prince Francesco left the inner palace. Aura and Zenjirou still hadn't recovered from their surprise but headed for the bedroom where their child was waiting.

Unfortunately, their goal was not to hold their now-recovered son but to bind the doctor, wet nurse, and maid to silence once more.

"Listen well: the events that occurred in this room are not to be spoken of under any circumstance. If the information were to be leaked, it would not only be your own lives on the line, but your families' as well. That is all."

"Understood, Your Majesty," the three answered in unison, lowering their heads.

"Let us hope so," Aura finished with a satisfied nod.

Michel was the royal physician, so he was used to keeping secrets. Cassandra too was a loyal woman whom Aura had faith in. And as for the blonde maid, Margarete, it hardly bore reiterating. She was a confidant of the queen's. If she wasn't trustworthy, no one was.

With that finished, Aura was satisfied that, barring anything unforeseen, there would be no drastic consequences from the incident. She and Zenjirou returned to their living room and collapsed onto the sofa.

"Phew..." Zenjirou sighed.

"Today has been an ordeal," she agreed before they fell into silence for a while, slumping down.

Too much had happened. Carlos had fallen ill, and Francesco had visited and revealed his secret while exposing the young prince's. Each event on its own was enough to shake the couple. They couldn't even muster the energy to raise their heads as the sunlight streamed in through the windows, lighting up the room brightly.

Zenjirou had canceled all his work for the day, but Aura still hadn't dealt with everything on her agenda. Regardless, she decided to leave things as they were for the time being. She had an intuitive understanding that forcing herself to continue working would put more and more pressure on her, and she would break sooner or later.

Besides, forgoing her work in the palace did not mean that the day itself would be unproductive.

"Guh..." she managed after getting a modicum of energy back and sitting up. "Zenjirou, do you need more time?"

"Ugh... Hmm? We're starting already?" he answered, turning his head to look at her from where he lay.

"We are, if you are willing to begin the conversation, that is."

"Mmm... Got it," he answered, sitting up with half-lidded eyes.

"Right then, where shall we begin?" Aura crossed her legs loosely, still not entirely alert herself.

Zenjirou cracked his neck and replied through a yawn, "Huh? Well, I've got several questions, if that works."

"I am unsure if I will be able to answer, but very well."

Permission granted, he began speaking haltingly, putting his thoughts in order as he did. "Right, so let's start with the fundamental question—or verification, I guess. Prince Francesco cured Zenkichi's illness. When he did, it was really healing magic, right? He didn't just use the stone hidden in his hand, did he?"

"He did not. I am certain you noticed as well, but the mana came from him and poured down onto Carlos. It was most definitely his own. Besides, the healing stone remains unused," she answered, setting a stone redolent with mana atop the table with a *clack*.

Zenjirou blinked in shock. "What? He left it with us?"

"Indeed. The price of his entry was the use of the healing stone on Carlos, after all, so taking an unused stone back with him would be telling."

"But didn't he say that Princess Bona would be angry with him if he used it?"

“By his own account, he is used to people being angry with him, and Bona is certainly used to being angry with him.”

“Oof...that phrasing makes you feel sorry for him, but I can see it happening, and I feel worse for Princess Bona,” Zenjirou mused, offering an internal prayer for her. “Still, he’s definitely no idiot. Which means Princess Bona being tasked with his supervision—”

“Is undoubtedly to hide the truth of the matter, yes,” Aura completed. “Having even one person take his foolishness seriously helps to increase his credibility.”

“What a shame...” Zenjirou murmured, feeling a prickling in his nose. Shaking off his deep sympathy for the princess, he moved the conversation along. “So, I more or less get that Zenkichi will be able to use enchantment as well as space-time magic, but why did he go so far to make sure we knew that? It feels like it only helps us, not them.”

Aura’s expression grew slightly pinched at his question. “No, looking at it in the short term, the information holds nearly no benefit for us. Do you think our son can learn the correct chants and the amount of mana required for enchantment magic along with the necessary visualizations?”

“Oh, right. We just know that it’s possible, but without actually learning it, it’s useless.”

She nodded gravely. “Correct. If we are to make use of enchantment magic without aid from the Sharou family, we need to be prepared for it to take around three generations.”

“Ouch, that’s a blow.”

So...that’s definitely no use in the short term. And it was obvious why Aura would say so.

“What, then?” he asked after some thought, guessing at the foreign royal’s motive. “Prince Francesco tells us, ‘Little Zenkichi can use enchantment magic, and I can teach him how, so how about a deal?’ or something like that?”

Aura nodded in agreement but offered her own interpretation. “The possibility of that is high. However, I doubt this is solely Prince Francesco’s

brainchild. The information he revealed is far too damning. If the first prince and king are waiting in the wings, it could be they are aiming for a greater change of opinion.”

“A greater change of opinion?” Zenjirou parroted, looking askance at her.

“Yes,” Aura continued, addressing his confusion. “Carlos learning enchantment provides no direct benefit to the Sharou family. But if the information were to become public, the people’s positions would change, would they not?”

“You mean Prince Francesco?”

“I do. Disregarding his political standing, the prince is an exceptionally talented individual. They would want to pass his immense mana reserves on to the next generation, to say nothing of his ability to use two lineal magics.”

“Right. There are exceptions, but mana reserves are usually hereditary.”

It was similar to the probability of two tall parents having tall children. With royals’ abilities to use lineal magic, more mana was an attractive proposition. Yet despite that, Francesco was forbidden from having children due to a secret agreement, despite his vast mana pool. It was, depending on your perspective, a waste.

“So the plan would be to use Zenkichi as a precedent to ultimately revoke the decision to force bloodlines with multiple lineal magics to die out?”

“It is but a theory. If they actually did so, it would be akin to a revolution in the Twin Kingdoms, so I think the possibility of something so drastic is a remote one.”

“I see. I guess things won’t be that chaotic, then?” he asked, a faint hope in his voice, only for that hope to be extinguished instantly by the expressionless queen.

“Unfortunately, I rather doubt it. Now that an outsider knows that Carlos can become an enchanter, it is most definitely plausible that it will become well-known. If that happens, the next question will be why he possesses the aptitude for both and not just space-time magic. Once that is public knowledge, it is only a matter of time before your lineage is exposed. At that point, the radical

faction behind General Pujol will push you all the more to take a concubine.”

“Ugh, man...”

While Aura had been speaking dispassionately about the future until then, her husband’s despair prompted a pained expression to make its way onto her face.

“I apologize, you have broken not a single promise you have made, and yet I could not keep my own...”

You could practically hear the slump in her voice as her shoulders dropped in dejection. Zenjirou reflexively tried to comfort her.

“Nah, you don’t need to worry that much about it. I know it’s not a failing on your part; my ancestors just had particularly unique circumstances.”

It truly wasn’t Aura’s fault. If there was one thing about the situation that could be called a failure on her behalf, it was that she had been too naive in her initial outlook. The situation had developed contrary to his desires, and fighting against it would be bad for the country, so as monarch, Aura had no choice but to push things onto him.

“When I first summoned you, it was on condition that you need do nothing but provide an heir. If only I could use time reversal magic, I would beat myself around the head. Then again, if you had done nothing, the palace would be in chaos,” she spat, deriding her own callow assumptions.

“Hmm, but I never really expected to do *nothing*. I spent months after the wedding doing just that. It wasn’t as enjoyable as I thought it would be. I can’t argue with the results, though.”

His words were chosen to ease her guilt, but he wasn’t lying. He had grown rather accustomed to the pressures of acting as a representative of the country, for better or worse, so it didn’t weigh too heavily on him. He had no real qualms about his current situation.

That was why he wanted to categorically refuse any suggestions of a concubine—it would turn his life upside down. He would likely need to steel himself if it became unavoidable, but he reaffirmed his conviction to dodge it until the very last moment.

“Still is there nothing you wish for? Nothing you wish to do?” she asked.

The question was a familiar one that she had asked many times before, and after a moment’s thought, he gave her a slightly different answer than he usually did.

“Hmm, if I had to answer... The thing I want most is to hold Zenkichi.”

It was probably far from what his wife wanted to hear, but it was without a doubt the thing he most desired. After all, he had been busy for the past few days and he’d had little time to visit the nursery, then the prince had come down with the fever.

Holding his beloved son and feeling the baby’s warmth with his own hands was his most pressing thought. It would put his mind at ease, and he wanted to do that as soon as he could now that the infant had recovered.

“Zenjiro...” Aura murmured, only able to muster a half-smile.

She had asked because she had wanted to reward her husband in some way for his unfaltering aid. But despite his answer falling short of her expectations, she felt much the same as he did.

“Of course,” she finally replied. “He has recovered now, so Doctor Michel can have no complaints. We should go to see him in a while.”

“Yeah, let’s. Whoo! Just the thought of it is waking me back up!”

As he said, the light was returning to his eyes. He lifted himself up from the sofa and rolled his shoulders.

“However, you are still not to speak in front of him.”

“Hey, I think I’ve been working pretty hard recently. I’m pretty sure my pronunciation’s much better, so I’d like to get on from just saying ‘It’s papa.’”

“I am afraid not. I recognize your efforts, but the results less so.”

“Such cruelty.”

“It is for his own benefit,” she said with a soft chuckle.

Their conversation thereafter was bright and cheerful, to cast off the gloom of their discussion thus far.



“Prince Francesco, that was far too rash! If you had put a foot wrong, you would have caused an utter scandal by entering another country’s inner palace like that!”

Francesco, meanwhile, had returned to the southern buildings, and—just as he had prepared himself for—his “minder” was giving him a long lecture.

Although the hottest season had already passed, their mist cooler made the room a much more pleasant temperature than it might have been. Yet despite the coolness, sweat was beading on the princess’s forehead, her face flushing as she yelled.

Francesco was reclining languidly on the sofa, but Bona had barely sat down and had her hands on the table as she bent towards him, almost snarling.

“My bad, my bad. I felt sorry for him. Prince Carlos isn’t even two, and he had a disease that could have killed him.”

Royals of the Twin Kingdoms, regardless of which family they were from, had priority access to the Gilbelle healers if they were sick or injured, so they weren’t used to royals losing their life to sickness or injury. From that perspective, Francesco’s “excuse” was rather plausible, but it wasn’t enough to satisfy someone as diligent as Bona.

“I sympathize with him as well, but the red-splotch fever is not such a lethal disease, I hear. Despite that, you used our only healing stone! What will you do if you come down with an illness yourself?! Unlike in the Twin Kingdoms, there are no healers here!”

Her argument was sound, but with Francesco being one of those healers, she was only making a fool of herself to anyone who had the requisite background knowledge.

Of course, a sudden deterioration in his condition due to an unavoidable illness or injury could interfere with his concentration, and in the worst case, his throat could be swollen to such a state that he couldn’t speak the incantation, both of which would render him incapable of casting the spell, so surrendering their only stone was indeed rash.

“It’s fine; I used the dual-burn parchment to get a report to my father. They’ll send a replacement.”

“Y-You used the dual-burn parchment as well?!” Bona demanded, on the verge of collapse.

Dual-burn parchment was another magic tool. Despite originally being developed to use offensively in order to start fires from distant locations, their people had noticed they could take advantage of the fact that they were linked together and would burn the same way, and therefore began burning letters into one piece to use it for transmitting information.

In general, the fastest type of information transfer was by way of dwarf wyverns, so it went without saying that dual-burn parchment was far and away the quicker and more secure option. It was like a single country having email while the rest were stuck with homing pigeons and horseback couriers. The utility of such an item was immense, and the inventor was said to have been the man in the shadows who had catapulted the country to its position of reigning supreme over the central region of Randlion.

There had been later developments, like dual-water parchments, which used the water in ink and dual-sandboxes using earth magic, amongst others, but they hadn’t reached the stage of practical use.

Ordinarily, commanders of border forts or diplomats sent to foreign lands were given a single sheet to use if it became absolutely necessary. Bona was utterly lost for words at her companion’s indifference in using it so carelessly.

Was it due to the difference in their backgrounds, she wondered, conscious of her frugality for a moment.

“Yup,” Francesco answered. “Father was rather strict and told me to inform him as soon as I used the stone. Ah, I also asked them to send a bunch of other stuff we don’t have enough of. I included a pedestal and vise for your engraving. You were complaining that there wasn’t anything decent here the other day, right?”

“You did? Thank you! It’s been a real problem. I hate to say it, but the engraving trade in this country is rather lacking, as are the tools.”

“Yeah, I get you. They’re just not put together the same way.”

“You noticed as well? The hold really isn’t there, and each stroke is slightly off because of it. The craftsmen seem satisfied with that, though, and I couldn’t really bring it u—” She stopped short. “That’s not the point here!”

Bona had just been getting into her flow on the subject of jewelry when she noticed the digression and shook off the allure of it to return to the topic at hand.

“Even if you sympathized with his plight, you could have simply handed the stone to Their Majesties, no? Why did you insist on entering the inner palace yourself?”

“Well, Capua has healing stones of its own, right? They weren’t using them, so even if I gave it to them, there was no guarantee she’d have used it for the prince.”

The argument was certainly logical, but hearing it made Bona’s stomach drop. “Um...Prince Francesco? I imagine not, but just to be certain, I would like to check. You did not say something along those lines to Her Majesty, did you? Right?”

“It wasn’t similar. I said exactly that to her. Why?”

With both hands on the table, Bona slumped forward.

“It’s all good,” the prince said cheerily with an unconcerned wave of his hand. “Queen Aura appreciates directness, and she’s not someone to get caught up on the little things.”

Bona, however, didn’t seem to hear him. “I... I need to somehow gain an audience with Her Majesty and apologize directly. Ah, but she’s likely busy, so I will need to go through His Majesty first.”

The fact that her mumbling was proactive and aiming for a solution rather than holding a grudge just went to show how deep her diligence and responsibility ran, even as she kept her head down. After a brief moment, she seemed to resolve herself and looked up sharply.

“Prince Francesco, I have pressing matters to attend to, so I will be taking my

leave. For mercy's sake, I beg you to stay quietly here. Do you understand that if you need to go to the palace, I expect you to tell me? None of this strange 'consideration,' all right? Excuse me, then."

With her tirade over, she quickly departed the room. The door closed with a soft thud as she left.

As if on cue, Francesco's already lax posture on the sofa was downgraded even further as he lay down and stretched out.

"Phew..." he breathed.

His earlier posture, lax though it had been, was an attempt to appear a little more dignified. He now had his usual smile on his face as he folded his arms under his head and looked up at the ceiling before speaking with utter exhaustion.

"Bona's sure cute. Just seeing her relaxes me."

In truth, he had never known another girl who was as easy to interact with as she was.

"I wonder if I'd be married to someone like her if I wasn't the way I was?"

He tugged his hands from under his head and stretched them up towards the ceiling, looking at the mana rising from them. It was a huge amount even for a royal, more than double that of Zenjirou or Bona. It led to him being able to use both lineal magics without either of them suffering in skill level. That didn't mean he had two different types of mana in his body, but he used enchantment magic with his right hand and healing magic with his left to avoid confusion.

The prince continued his monologue as he watched the mana snaking from both of his hands. "It's a little tough not being able to marry, though I enjoy the carefree side of things too. I'll pass on taking up a claim on the throne and getting thrown into politics, at least."

His smile took on a bitter edge that he would never have allowed onto his face in front of anyone else.

"I wish father and grandfather had values a little more similar to mine..." he muttered, not moving from position as he stared silently up at the ceiling.

“The Unity Faction, huh?” he said eventually, a new phrase passing his lips.

Simply put, the Unity Faction was a political organization that decried the current state of two monarchs ruling a single country as unstable and wanted the royal lines to be fused.

While the organization was summed up as “the Unity Faction,” there were various sub-factions that wanted to do things in different ways. One wanted the Sharou family to rule and the Gilbelles to be subordinate, another wanted each to reign in turn, and so on.

One minority was the Total Unity Faction. As the name suggested, it espoused the idea of the families joining as one through marriage and quite literally unifying. One of their main tenets was that someone who was a symbol of both families, or in other words someone who could use both types of lineal magic, should ascend to the throne.

In the past, there had been none who were suitable, so it had all been theoretical. But *now* there was someone, albeit unknown to the public, who embodied that ideal.

“It’s not like I can’t sympathize, but I don’t want to get dragged into it.”

Their position was one that could destroy the history the Twin Kingdoms had made while standing hand in hand in public, even as the two families vied for power in the background. Getting directly to the meat of it, he could only see it as causing chaos from peace. It was bothersome, so he decided to stop thinking about anything more difficult.

“Well, what will be will be,” he said in summary, hauling himself up as his usual smile returned to his face.



Several days later, the four royals met in a room of the palace. From the Kingdom of Capua were Queen Aura and her consort, Zenjirou. From the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were Prince Francesco and Princess Bona. Everyone in the country with the title of “royalty” was gathered there. They were meeting under the pretense of an apology for the prince’s impropriety in

entering the inner palace, and as thanks for his healing, but the true objective was something different. In fact, it had ended with a simple exchange between the two women.

Bona had said, "I apologize deeply for the incident."

Aura had then replied, "Not at all. I cannot thank you enough for using such a valuable healing stone on my son. I will see that you are repaid for it."

Bona was diligent to a fault and had already found their common ground with an exchange of letters. Aura was aware of the deeper context and had no desire to make things more complicated. Therefore, the meeting between the four of them soon moved on to the next topic.

"We're done, right? Yeah, we have to be, so I'll bring my news up next. This is the magic tool of future compensation. Thank you for your cooperation, Your Majesty."

As he spoke, Francesco pulled out a small gold construction and placed it on the table.

"Oh, wonderful."

"Wow, it is splendid."

Zenjirou and Aura leaned towards the table without realizing it as they took in the sight. Zenjirou had had nothing to do with its construction, so his reaction was hardly surprising, and while Aura had helped with the mana on several occasions, this was the first time she had seen the completed item.

It was only about two fingers wide, with an octahedral metal framework surrounding the faint blue marble that Zenjirou had provided. Given how it shone in the light, the framework was probably made of pure gold.

The item was simple, but it was still spectacularly constructed. To Zenjirou's eye, at least, the pieces of the framework were all of equal thickness and even the holes that displayed the marble were eight completely identical equilateral triangles.

Simple it may have been, but that meant the skill involved was on full display rather than hidden away.

Even as the praise cheered him, Francesco continued his explanation as its creator. “The actual functional part is only the jewel from His Majesty Zenjirou, the outer framework being there to protect it. A spherical magic tool will lose its function with the slightest nick, so this way, it will not be easily damaged. However, that is by no means a guarantee, so please be careful with it.”

“I understand,” Aura answered with a solemn nod as she picked it up. “Hmm, such a small thing.”

“It is, but it does almost all that you wished. Magic tools are broadly separated into three types: single-use, self-recovering, and manually recovered, so I would call this manually recovered if I were to classify it.”

He went on with an explanation of how it worked, “To use it, you directly touch the jewel within and use the language of magic to say, ‘I offer the nourishment of however-many days,’ which will activate the future expense ability to store the mana inside. It is also possible to add to it over time, as you requested. If you were to add a day’s worth now and then do so again a week later, there would be two days’ worth of mana stored within. To use the mana inside, you touch the jewel in the same way and say, ‘I put you to use.’”

He continued to elaborate for a while before finally summing things up. “So, those are the conditions to use the item. However, you cannot use a partial amount of the mana like you wished, so when you invoke it, it will release all of the mana within, whether that be a day’s worth or a year’s, so keep that in mind.”

It seemed the prince was at least serious when explaining magic tools—his expression remained stern and his tone was completely different.

“Amazing, I have never seen such a fine magic tool, and this construction is outstanding. I can see why you are considered one of the best enchanters *and* one of the best craftsmen,” Zenjirou praised him effusively, keeping his tone polite.

“Ah, you’ll make me blush. The effort was worth it, though,” Francesco said in response, the familiar innocent smile on his face as he scratched his head, embarrassed.

“A splendid creation indeed,” Aura agreed, keeping her face and voice calm

but internally marveling over its power. “Allow me to offer my thanks once again.”

The significance of the item was immense. While so far, the mana required for such things as time reversal and greater barriers was too much to be worth using, this gave them a more realistic way of using the spells. It was a pity that it wasn't possible to use only some mana each time; she could have been much more liberal with her most useful spell: teleportation. One could not have everything, though.

Yet if we could mass-produce these, we could certainly do something similar, she thought.

Of course, the Twin Kingdoms' enchanters would most likely be unwilling to mass-produce magic tools for Capua. Inevitably, then, it meant that such a plan would rely on having Carlos learn enchanting or for Zenjirou to father an illegitimate child who possessed the magic.

Any child he had with Aura would have too much of the Capuan bloodline in their veins, and it would be rather unlikely for them to awaken their enchanting magic as well. It would be a different matter if they were blessed with a similar amount of mana to Carlos so that they could use both, but expecting two descendants of that caliber, even directly from her, would be far too optimistic.

Until now, the only person Aura had ever met with an amount of mana that matched Carlos's was the blond prince in front of her. Aura herself only had around seventy to eighty percent of the mana that he did, and excluding the two in question, she was seen as having an exceptionally large amount. With that in mind, expecting her second child onward to have even the same amount of mana as Carlos was ridiculous, and she was well aware of it.

She would continue the development of glass production and eventually be able to mass-produce marbles. At the same time, she could have Zenjirou take several concubines and produce as many offspring as was manageable, to increase the number of dual space-time and enchantment users.

That option, from the perspective of the country, was without a doubt something that should be put into practice. Of course, it wasn't so simple at present. She also had to take into account any influence from the mothers and

how the Twin Kingdoms would react to their magic being stolen.

Regardless, it would be best to assume it is now inevitable that he take a concubine.

Just as the queen came to that heartrending conclusion, there was a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of the familiar slender-faced secretary, Fabio.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. It is nearly time, if you are willing.”

Aura had far more responsibilities than the other three royals, so she was never able to stay for the entire meeting.

“It is already so late! Very well. Prince Francesco, Princess Bona, I must excuse myself. Zenjirou, I leave the rest to you,” she said, standing, which prompted the others to do the same.

“I had a good time, Your Majesty,” Francesco said with a smile.

“Our thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule for us, Your Majesty,” was Bona’s response, as serious as ever and accompanied by a bow.

“Please do, Your Majesty,” Zenjirou added, seeing his wife off with a phrase more polite than he would ever have uttered in the inner palace.



With the rest of the meeting in Zenjirou’s hands, Aura’s destination was the most familiar room in the palace: her office.

She unintentionally let out a gloomy sigh as she sat in her chair, but the head secretary was not one to let such an emotional outburst pass.

“Whatever is the matter, Your Majesty? Such a sigh is unlike you.”

The queen had mostly lent him to Zenjirou of late, so his blunt manner was more nostalgic than angering.

“Ah, well, it is simply that I am once again to burden my husband. It is honestly wearing on me.”

She leaned back in the chair, making it creak as she looked up at the ceiling. The secretary’s usually implacable expression morphed into one of a raised

eyebrow at her complaint as he spoke mockingly.

“Oh my my, taken with him, are you? Is angering him something to truly be so fearful of?”

His clear jest prompted her to narrow her eyes and almost spit her reply at him.

“Yes, it certainly is. It is honestly the thing I am most fearful of right now. Do you truly not understand why his anger is something to be feared?”

“Pardon? Well, there is the common saying that as understanding as someone is, they are all the more difficult to deal with when they surrender to their emotions.” His answer was oddly indirect for once.

“Oh, no, no, no,” she answered, a tinge of superiority bleeding into her words. “It is nothing so simple. Allow me to offer an example. Assume that Manuel Márquez had been angered. It matters not which of us is in the right, but if we do not ameliorate his mood, the country will suffer greatly. If you were in my position there, how would you approach it?”

While not entirely understanding what she was getting at, the secretary answered immediately despite the puzzled look he gave her.

“How would I ameliorate Count Márquez’s mood? If speed is the biggest consideration, then temporarily exempting his county from royal taxes would be the quickest method. For better or worse, his decisions are founded in what profits him.”

Satisfied with his answer, Aura nodded and brought up her next example. “If the person in question was not Count Márquez, but instead was Pujol Guillén? Under the same conditions, the poor relations with him would see the country lose its strength. What method would you use?”

“I suppose the only method would be to promote him to marshal. He is ambitious, but the ambition is a military man’s, not a noble’s.”

Once again satisfied, the queen grinned and asked her final question. “Indeed. This is the main question here: if the same conditions held true but the person in question was Zenjirou, how would you repair the relationship?”

Fabio fell silent for a while. Yet however long the silence stretched on for, he could find no answer.

“I surrender. There is nothing I can think of,” he finally admitted with a shrug.

Aura’s grin deepened. “Precisely. You do not know of anything? Cannot think of anything? Nor can I. I am sure you understand why I fear angering him so much. There is nothing I can do to soothe that anger if I do so; no card I can play to get him to listen to my side.”

“Truly, I have never before met someone with so little in the way of attachments,” Fabio admitted.

Zenjirou did not desire riches, nor did he show any interest in status. He didn’t even have anything in particular that he collected passionately. He was far from uninterested in women, but he had eyes for no one but his wife, and in fact, was doing his utmost to avoid a concubine.

“I have no method to soothe any rage on his part, and yet if our relationship suffers, so too will the country. Is it truly so strange to fear angering such a person?”

“No, it was my mistake to have implied so. My apologies,” the secretary offered the glaring queen.

“So, what is on the table for today?” Aura asked now that the small talk was out of the way. “A reply to the petition from the Eastern nobles?”

“No. That was the plan, but this morning we received a dwarf wyvern from General Pujol regarding the extermination of the raptors. Please read these first.”

As he spoke, he lined up four tubes containing thin sheets of drake parchment on her desk. Considering the usual custom of using the wyverns, the four would all be identical, but it was important to make sure.

“General Pujol sent dwarf wyverns? There must have been some complication,” Aura mused sourly before opening one of the tubes with a dark expression and unrolling the sheet to read. As she did, her lips twisted in displeasure.

“Your Majesty? It is indeed bad news?”

Aura sighed in answer before explaining. “It certainly is. He failed in the extermination. Or more specifically, the raptors call for more manpower than he has on hand, and he is requesting reinforcements.”

“What?” Fabio managed, his usual composure gone, his eyes going wide in shock.

His reaction was understandable. The message was just that unexpected. Pujol Guillén led the elites, the Drake Marksmen Knights, and yet he had failed to exterminate swarm raptors. Any citizen of the country would doubt their ears upon hearing that.

Aura tapped the parchment in her hand and shrugged slightly. “If the contents of this are true, then it is no fault of his own. In that situation, I would have called for reinforcements myself.”

“If both you and the general are saying as much, it must be true. Shall we dispatch reinforcements?”

“We shall. They will be hunting in the mountains. The quality of the men does not matter as much as the number, but we must be wary of losing soldiers. We should provide a well-stocked supply carriage to ease the burden as much as we can.”

“That will weigh heavily on the treasury.”

“I know, but it is necessary.”

Fabio remained silent for a few moments but eventually agreed. “I understand. I would still like to hear the details later, but the extermination of these mere drakes has grown rather larger in scope.”

“It truly has. I have never seen a situation that the phrase ‘wishful thinking’ was more suited for. It is a cruel world we live in,” the queen agreed, taking a deep breath as she allowed herself a heavy sigh.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life* 5.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Mutual Aid

The working conditions of the maids in the Capuan inner palace were, on the whole, fairly pleasant.

While it was true that there were few maids given the size of the palace, they only had to care for Zenjirou and Aura, so the actual amount of work was relatively low for each of them. Yes, as of late, they had a third royal to care for in the form of Carlos Zenkichi, and he required a lot of attention, the bulk of it handled by the wet nurse, Cassandra. But the maids were nothing more than assistants to her, so their workload hadn't increased much, relatively speaking.

At lunchtime, Aura was almost never present in the inner palace, and Zenjirou was a strange example of a noble considering he preferred to be left alone rather than fawned over, so there was rarely any unexpected work being added to their pile.

Of course, there were still the meals to prepare, all the rooms to clean, the bath to scrub and heat, the gardening, and a whole assortment of other daily jobs. Still, it was far less than what one would ordinarily expect when working for a noble's or royal's estate, so it would be fair to call it "easy."

Yet it was not all sunshine and daisies. There were most definitely disadvantages to working for someone from another world like Zenjirou. The easiest disadvantage to understand was the idea of "active hours."

Zenjirou had been brought up where it was the norm to be able to flick a switch and light up a room, so he stayed up rather late. Obviously, he was always one to be considerate of his surroundings, so he made sure that he didn't just stay up whiling away the time later than necessary. However, he'd brought a domestic generator with him, along with several lamps, so he hadn't kicked the habit of staying up into the night (although in reality, he was actually only up until around ten or eleven).

Inevitably, that had an impact on some of the maids. However much he avoided calling on them, they couldn't simply retire to bed without considering

their still-awake master. Several of them remained up late on a rotation, just in case he were to call on them before he went to sleep.

In this way, Zenjirou's bad habit of staying up late was passed on to the maids. Naturally, the three problem children, Faye, Dolores, and Letti, were no exception.

The hour, by the standards of Capua, was late, but on Earth, it would have caused an argument if one had told a preteen to go to bed by then.

The three maids' room was filled with faint light and quiet sounds. The only areas of the inner palace that had electricity were the rooms where Zenjirou lived: the living room and bedroom. Therefore, the main source of light in the room was a tall oil lamp in the corner.

The flickering flame wasn't exactly reliable as a form of illumination, but the room wasn't particularly big, so it could at least reveal the shape of the chamber as a whole.

"All right, three holes left. If I can get a birdie here, I might beat Sir Zenjirou's score!"

A slight woman with short, curled hair—Faye—was lying on a wooden bed, staring intently at a game console. She was kicking her legs around as she lay sprawled out, but her entire focus was on the game.

That said, she was snacking on banana chips from a wooden bowl at the side of the bed while she played, so whether or not you could call her truly focused was up for debate.

The console she was using at the moment only had one screen. It was a different one than they had played the block drop and cart racing games on before. It wasn't that they had gone out of their way to borrow another one—their supplier, Sir Zenjirou, had offered it instead.

Apparently, it had something to do with them getting good at the games too quickly and his snack stock being in danger. He could have simply stopped offering prizes, but the fact that he didn't was perhaps the strongest evidence that he was enjoying the competition with them.

The foods with relatively short best-by dates had already been eaten by either

the royal couple or the troublemakers themselves, so there were no more of the chocolate snacks or cookies. At the moment, Zenjirou was using up his rations of chocolate and canned biscuits, which he'd had on hand in case of anything unforeseen, and once they were finished, he would have no snacks left from his homeworld.

Faye wasn't aware of any of that, simply spurred on by competitiveness and gluttony as she tried to beat his score.

The light from the screen dimly outlined the contours of her face from below. Her large, dark eyes gleamed in the light, and her small lips were pursed in concentration as she picked her moment to press the button.

"Argh, I missed! Why? No way! The wind?"

The huge miss and out-of-bounds shot right when it mattered the most had her kicking her legs and yelling, forgetting the late hour. Her behavior prompted one of her roommates, a tall maid named Dolores, to scold her.

"Faye, quiet down! Do you want to get complaints?!"

The neighboring rooms were home to the other maids, and inviting their ire would put their own trio in a much weaker position. Staying up so late was not exactly praiseworthy, and the others would likely have retired for the night already.

"I'm sorry, but I had to. Argh, if I'd gotten a birdie, I might have been able to beat Sir Zenjirou," Faye apologized immediately, lowering her voice but still complaining.

Dolores got up from her own bed and moved over to take a look. "Oh, you got that good a score? Hang on, you're still using that fat guy? His shots always swing wide; he hasn't got the fine control. I told you that you should use that blonde woman instead."

"But he hits the farthest... Ughhh..."

The two of them were really into the game. The short-haired, smaller maid and the longer-haired, tall maid discussed it at length.

"You're always too focused on the high score," Dolores told her. "You need to

play it safer on the courses with hazards or out-of-bounds zones to the sides. You can be more aggressive on safer holes, then you'd be more consistent."

"No matter how carefully I play, I mess up a shot and lose the score at the same time. If I play the first half safe and then screw up in the second, I can't get back on course. So I've got to go all-in from the start."

"That's because you're only putting importance on the distance, and you chose an inaccurate character," Dolores said tiredly to her impatient companion.

Dolores had actually been influenced by the culture from Zenjirou's world through the games in a number of ways and hadn't noticed it either. Golf's scoring was strange to begin with: a "par" was zero, a "bogey" was plus one, and a "birdie" was minus one. Whoever had the lowest number at the end was the winner.

The game automatically calculated the scores, of course, but with the joy and sorrow of getting a better score and then a worse one, the three had more or less come to understand how the system worked. Through that, they had come to more or less understand the concept of zero and negative numbers.

Unsurprisingly, the three had no real idea of how valuable such knowledge was.

"Argh, I knew it. Damn, I was so close. If I hadn't made that mistake, I might have managed it!" Faye despaired as the game came to an end and buried her face in the pillow even as she held onto the console.

"Oh, you're done?"

"Mhmm, I'm done..." she replied, her defeated voice muffled by the pillow.

"Then turn off the electrishidy so we don't waste it. Letti isn't back yet."

"Ah, right, Letti's up next," she said before turning her head to face her roommate. "Hey, Dolooooores?"

Her syrupy voice let her friend know exactly what she wanted, and Dolores immediately took the console from her hands.

"No, wait your turn."

“Huh? Eh, it doesn’t matter, I’ll hand it over as soon as Letti gets back.”

Dolores slapped Faye’s hands down as she reached stubbornly across the bed.

“No, I know what will happen if I let you. You’ll just say, ‘wait a minute, just one more hole and I’ll be done,’ and then you’ll end up playing the whole course. Letti’s the kind of person to let you off with a smile as well.”

As the two spoke, it was almost like the conversation was a signal, and a strained but still somehow relaxed voice came from the other side of the door.

“Fayye, Doloores, let me in; my hands are full.”

“She... She’s back.”

“Fine. Wait a minute, Letti; we’ll get the door.”

The two hurried from their beds and trotted over to greet their other roommate.



“Phew, that was heavy. Thank you both.”

Relieved of her burden by the other two, the large-chested, droopy-eyed maid—Letti—sat on her own bed.

“It’s fine,” Dolores answered, “you must be tired from the extra shift.”

“Oh, wow! Presents! There’s our Vanessa. Hey, hey, Letti? Can I have some too?”

Having placed the metal jug of alcohol and the wooden bowl on a small side table, she had immediately lifted the lid from the bowl.

“Faye! That’s rude!”

“Aha ha, it’s fine, let’s all eat it together. Ah, Dolores, that jug has some of Sir Zenjirou’s alcohol in it. He wanted us to taste it and let him know what we thought.”

Despite Dolores’s rebuke, Letti had her usual soft smile on her lips. The maids usually worked and finished their shifts in groups of three, but Letti had been working later because Vanessa needed the extra help. The younger maids currently working in the kitchen were not too skilled, and unfortunately, their

turn there had lined up with a rather elaborate meal for the next day that required extra preparation that night.

As a result, Vanessa had hurriedly scouted out Letti—who was the best at cooking among the younger women—for some urgent assistance. Capua didn't yet have the concept of overtime pay, so it was effectively unpaid, but when it was in the kitchen, they got to bring snacks back, so it was better than helping out at the other posts.

“Oh? Alcohol from Sir Zenjirou?”

Among the three of them, Dolores had the strongest taste for alcohol, and the statement made her turn around in excitement.

“Yeah, it's freshly made, though, so it might be no good. He told us to stop drinking right away if it tastes strange. Oh, he also wants to hear what we thought of it later.”

The content of the jug was a liqueur that Zenjirou had come up with recently. The base was the distilled spirits he made with the electric, thermostatic still he had brought with him. The still meant that the actual distillation process went relatively well, but it just resulted in strong alcohol that wasn't really enjoyable to drink.

To that end, he had added things like fruit juice or other alcoholic drinks to it to create more cocktails, but this was a new development. Back in Japan, there were a fair few people who made liqueurs like plum brandy. It wasn't particularly difficult to do. You took a high-proof spirit, added fruits and sugar, and then sealed it and left it somewhere cool and dark for at least a month. At that point, you were pretty much done.

Most recipes used shochu, Japanese apricots, and rock sugar, but that obviously wasn't an option in this world, so he used his home-distilled liquor, a lime-like fruit, and brown sugar instead.

Of course, his bringing the still in the first place made it clear that he was planning to make alcohol in this world, and he had downloaded several pages from the internet as an introductory guide for making liqueur.

However, he wasn't sure of how alcoholic his base was (he hadn't actually

brought a hydrometer with him), so it was still trial and error. Regardless, he had sterilized all the containers by way of boiling along with washing and preserving the other ingredients to make things as safe as he could, microbiologically, but there was no guarantee.

The sampling the maids did was akin to poison testing, considering the still-experimental nature of it, but there were a lot of them, starting with Dolores, who rather enjoyed the job. While she ordinarily followed along in the troublemaking, Dolores was currently at the forefront of things.

“All right, Faye, we need to shift the table, so move the food and drink off it for a minute.”

The room they had was by no means a big one for three people.

“Sure, got it!”

“Are you okay, Dolores? Shall I help?” Letti offered, moving to stand, but Dolores waved her off.

“I’m fine. The room’s dark and small, so it’s better to do it on my own.”

As she said that, she moved the table with practiced movements so that it was between the beds. Given how dark the room was, it was done half by feel, but Dolores knew how the entire space was laid out, so she managed to get the transfer done quickly and safely.

“Great, that should work. Faye, you can put the food and drink back; I’ll go get cups.”

“Sure thing. Oh, I still have some banana chips left, so I’ll add them too.”

“That’ll be nice... Hang on, have you been eating in bed again?! I keep telling you to stop that because of the crumbs in the sheets.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Faye apologized without a hint of remorse on her face as she leaped onto the bed and started brushing it off.

“Don’t do that! What’ll you do if it gets on the floor?! We’ll get rats!”

“Dolores, you’re too loud,” Letti told her, her speech slightly quicker than usual.

Her roommate's yells had been rather loud, but fortunately, no one turned up from the neighboring rooms to shout at them.

When their preparations were complete, the three used their beds as chairs and began helping themselves to the food and drink on offer.

"Hmm...it doesn't smell strange, at least," Dolores said as she poured the liqueur into a cup and took a careful sniff.

Considering the drink they were about to partake in could have been a failure, her caution was valid. Following her statement, she raised it to her lips and poked out her tongue, dipping the tip into the liquid.

"Hmmm..."

"What do you think?"

"Does it taste off to you?"

Faye and Letti worriedly checked in as Dolores frowned slightly.

"No, I don't think it's a failure," she said after a silent shake of her head, then went on to give a frank opinion. "It certainly doesn't taste off, but it *is* exceedingly sweet. There's still some bitterness to it, so it's drinkable, but it's nothing like what I like."

"Oh, right, you prefer your drinks to be harsher."

"Let's have a taste..." Faye said, taking a sip of her own after Dolores's review. "Wow, it's great. I love this. It's definitely the best drink I've ever had." Faye's face, on the other hand, had lit up with joy.

"Well, you like your sweets. Take care, though; it's amazingly strong."

"It's fine, all good," Faye insisted.

"And...you've already drunk the lot."

Unlike Dolores, the drink seemed to have met Faye's standards...and her sweet tooth. Having already finished a cup, she immediately reached out and poured a second. Meanwhile, Dolores and Letti were using it to wet their throats before reaching out for the food.

"Are these pickled leaves?" Dolores asked. "They go rather well with the

sweetness of the drink.”

“Yeah, and these are meat and vegetable skewers. I used the leftovers from the ingredients for tomorrow and added spice and salt before I cooked them. They’re tasty.”

“Hmm, they are on their own, but they’re a bit at odds with the sweetness of the drink. I prefer the pickles.”

“Mmm, that’s a shame. Something that complements the sweetness... I’ll have to think about it.”

Letti’s passion for cooking was in no way dampened by her colleague’s poor review, and she immediately began thinking of what her next creation would be while she ate from her skewers.

“Huh, give one here too,” Faye said, trying one of the skewers. “They’re great! Nicely done, Letti. Dolores just talks a good game even though she can’t make anything impressive.”

“Nor can you, Faye,” Dolores retorted.

“But unlike you, I don’t criticize things that others make. I like it all!”

“You just lack the palate for such things. It’s nothing to be proud of, although I guess it’s good for you.”

As ever, the two of them were arguing, but the tone of their voices was cheerful, and they were enjoying themselves.

Understanding that, Letti’s tone wasn’t truly harsh either. “Come on, both of you stop fighting and enjoy the food.”

“It’s fine, I am. Wait a minute! There’s already none left? I can’t really see. I know: Dolores, let me use that for a minute,” Faye said, her hand scrabbling around in the deep bowl of pickled leaves and finding nothing until she came up with an idea and climbed onto Dolores’ bed to take the console from where it lay near her pillow. “Great, now I can see.”

Using the backlight, she checked the bowl, earning a shocked look from Dolores.

“I’m sure you used the hand you weren’t eating with, didn’t you? We’re only

borrowing that—it's Sir Zenjirou's."

"Obviously, I only ate with my right hand, and I'm only using my left to hold this."

While she might act outrageously, Faye was a full-fledged maid of the inner palace, and she maintained at least a minimum standard of behavior. Even while she was playing on the console before Letti got back, she was using a damp cloth at the side of her bed to wipe her fingers each time she ate before gripping the console again.

"Hmm, yup, all gone. That's a shame."

"Well, there *are* three of us eating," Dolores replied.

"Aha ha, well it's probably better if we don't eat too much before bed," Letti added.

"That reminds me: we should probably head to sleep soon. What time is it, Faye?"

Faye used her left hand to quickly look through the console. "Give me a second. Umm, it's three minutes past nine," she answered, easily reading the numerals on the screen to tell the time.

At some point, the three of them had learned how the twenty-four-hour clock worked. It was probably just a matter of time before they started using phrases like "five more minutes" in the morning.

"Ack, we definitely need to go to sleep soon. Let's get tidied up and do so; we're moving to the gardens tomorrow," Dolores said, getting up from her bed.

"Argh, I forgot," Letti whined. "I hate working in the gardens."

The maids in the inner palace rotated between cleaning, cooking, bathroom duty, and the gardens, but naturally, they all had their specializations and weaknesses.

Letti was blessed with the strongest culinary skills of their group, but in exchange, she was terrible at gardening. Or perhaps it would be better to say that, considering her slowness, she wasn't particularly capable of most of the work in spite of being exceptionally skilled in the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, I’ll work hard for your part too,” Faye promised easily, immediately starting to tidy up while Letti slumped tearfully on the bed and squashed her large chest against it.

In fact, despite her small stature, Faye had the stamina and energy to not worry too much about working in the gardens.

“I’ll help if I can,” Dolores added. Outside of cooking, she was fairly *au fait* with most of the work and didn’t *struggle* with the gardening like Letti did, but she did *dislike* it. The fact that she left herself the escape route of “if I can” for the work she didn’t want to do if she could avoid it showed her feelings on the matter.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll do more when we’re on cooking duty in exchange,” Letti said happily, unaware of her roommate’s ulterior motive.



Working in the gardens was a duty that was seen in both extremes by the maids of the inner palace. It was usually either their favorite or least favorite job amongst the many they rotated through. Those who considered it their least favorite outnumbered those who liked it the most.

The reason the majority disliked the task was simple: it was far more demanding than anything else they had to do. It got hot dealing with the pans and oven in the kitchen, but it was even more stifling at the height of the season while cutting the grass. The baths were tedious to clean due to their size, but there was no comparison to the size of the gardens.

Overall, the work was much more physically demanding. So why did some of the maids enjoy it the most? The reason for that was similarly simple: because the amount of time they worked there was the shortest.

While on kitchen duty, they had to be there for all three meals of the day. On bath duty, they had to wash the chamber in the morning and then keep the baths at an appropriate temperature throughout the afternoon and evening. While the actual cleaning could be done relatively quickly, they also had to be ready until late at night for any urgent requests from their master.

It was only natural that they spent far less time overall when they were on

shift in the gardens. The harsh sun in Capua was not something one could simply work through with guts and willpower, and they couldn't do everything that was needed after the sun had set. Therefore, the norm was to work from dawn until the sun had risen, and from dusk until the sun had set—a relatively small number of hours.

While it called for an early start, it also led to a very long break, and they finished early. If focusing strictly on the number of hours worked, it was a real blessing.

However, some of the maids hated the job more than any other, so it was easy to imagine how heavy their burden was. Incidentally, as far as the three troublemakers went, Dolores and Letti went with the majority opinion, and Faye was one of the minority who enjoyed it.

"The grass has grown considerably here, so we will focus on the mowing today," echoed Emilia's—the head gardener's—voice over the just-lit greenery.

"Right!"

"Understood!"

"Got it!"

Faye, Dolores, and Letti all answered in turn, much louder than they usually spoke. That was Emilia's aim. She was a middle-aged woman the likes of which were seen throughout Capuan nobility. She had long black hair and tanned skin, and her stomach was slightly rounded as one often saw in older people. However, the word "fat" didn't quite fit. The phrase "solidly built" suited her better.

Speaking bluntly, one could call her a stocky middle-aged woman; however, her movements were far quicker than one would expect.

Her right hand was covered in a thick mitt and held a small, single-handed sickle. She crouched down and showed the three younger maids how to mow down the grass. The girls all hurriedly took their own sickles and followed suit.

As they began to cut the grass, the sun was already beating down on them and casting their shadows far across the lawn.

About an hour passed.

“Phew...no more.” Letti unsurprisingly gave in as the heat rose rapidly with the sun.

Still crouched on the grass, she straightened up from her cutting and drove her fist into her back several times. In response to her back bending, the sweat on her forehead dripped down her face and onto her chest. They were all wearing thick veils to protect against the heat of the sun, but it was barely better than nothing.

“You’re no good with the sickle even though you’re great with a knife,” Faye commented.

“Faye, it’s nothing to do with how good I am with the tool...” she replied with exhaustion to her smaller, energetic coworker as the latter continued cutting away in the area Letti had been assigned.

It wasn’t a lack of skill that was Letti’s problem; it was a lack of stamina. Letti wasn’t particularly flexible to begin with, so crouching down for an extended period was difficult for her. On top of her issues with physical work, her larger breasts threw off her balance and meant that on a lot of her swings, she lost her stability. She was also slightly heavier than the other young maids, so kneeling hurt her knees more as well.

Altogether, she and the garden work were essentially natural enemies, given how incompatible the two were.

“What a sight. And to think you are the daughter of a warrior,” Emilia said harshly, still facing away from Letti and continuing her own work.

“A-Ah, my apologies, Miss Emilia!”

Shaking, Letti hurriedly moved to pick up her sickle, but before she could resume, still out of breath, Emilia spoke again.

“Wait, Letti. Were you being lazy, or were you at the end of your stamina?”

“Ah, what?”

“Answer.”

Letti wrenched her tongue from where it had dried against the roof of her

mouth and answered.

“I-I wasn’t being lazy. I really am at my limit.”

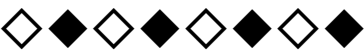
“Then move to the trees and recover yourself. Sloth is unthinkable, and a lack of ability is a huge issue. But pushing yourself beyond what you are capable of is absolutely forbidden. Someone pushing themselves beyond their capabilities and collapsing is far more of an impediment.”

Emilia’s stance as a superior was, for better or worse, for those under her to work to the best of their abilities. She would show no mercy to those shirking work and would require effort from someone unskilled to improve themselves. She would also ask for the utmost to be done with those poor skills while remonstrating those who tried to work beyond their means.

It might have sounded good, but the people who struggled couldn’t bear it. Emilia would scold them for making a mistake and scold them all the more if they tried to take it back, so the weak-willed withered before her.

Of course, Letti was not so fragile.

“I will. Thank you, Ma’am,” she answered with a beaming smile to the harsh order before practically crawling over to the shade.



“The sun is getting to a climbing height. We will leave things here for the morning.”

The statement was met with universal agreement. With that said, there was a difference in tone between the three.

“Okay...we’re finally done,” Letti managed.

“Ah, that was definitely tough,” was Dolores’s contribution.

“Yay, we’re done! We can play around until evening now!” Faye cheered, jumping around in contrast to her companions as they slumped. “Oh, right, Sir Zenjirou said we could use his soccer ball when we were free. Want to play, you two?”

Faye’s smile seemed to imply it was a great idea, but her coworkers merely glanced at their friend as they rolled into the shade and sat amid the greenery.

“I’m fine,” Dolores answered faintly. “Play on your own.”

Letti couldn’t even muster the energy to reply and merely gave a silent shake of her head.

“More time for me, then. Yahoo!” Faye cried as she ran off into the building to fetch the ball.

“She’s inhuman. She must be at least half drake,” Dolores gasped.

“Aha ha... I can’t exactly disagree,” the other replied with a wry smile, finally regaining the energy to speak.

Drakes were cold-blooded, like large reptiles, and grew more active as the temperature rose. Of course, as organic life-forms, they had an upper limit, but such a limit was at the very least far higher than the highest temperatures reached on the Southern Continent. It was no surprise that they were the dominant life-form on the continent. Humanity was nothing more than an introduced species, not able to adapt to the environment in anywhere near the same way.

The sight of Faye out there in her miniskirt playing with the soccer ball was bizarre enough that one could definitely call it “inhuman” and say that she had drake blood in her veins.

“One, two, three, four! Hiyahh!”

“Ahh! Faye, we can see your panties,” Letti warned.

“It’s not at all erotic, though,” Dolores added as the two of them watched, exhausted, when her game became more like jumping kicks.



“Now, now, what a shame. I won’t tell you to follow her example, but you should act your age a little more,” Emilia told them kindly, a reluctant smile on her face.

Completely contrary to her behavior while they were working, her tone was kind and thoughtful. Emilia was the one who had the most difference between her personal time and work personalities.

Of course, the maids all lived where they worked, so even their breaks and sleeping hours weren’t, strictly speaking, “personal time,” so it would be better worded as her being as kind as she could while not giving them instructions for work.

Regardless, she was known among the younger maids for that clear difference. She was extremely strict while they were working, but no matter how harshly she spoke, it made no difference to her kindness while they were resting.

“You won’t recover just sitting around like that. Here, have a drink,” she said, offering a pitcher she had fetched from the fridge along with several wooden cups.

The pitcher contained water mixed with sugar and sour fruit juices. It replenished both the calories and water they used while working, and the sourness made it easier to drink, so it was perfect for the situation. It was like a primitive sports drink.

“Aaah! You’re great, Miss Emilia! You can say that again!”

Standing there holding out her cup expectantly was Faye, who had just been playing around with the ball not a moment before.

“When did you get here?” Dolores demanded, glaring at her small coworker with heavily lidded eyes.

“Now now,” Emilia said. “There’s enough for all of you. Wait your turn. There’s an order to this,” she said, softly tapping Faye’s forehead with her index finger before adjusting her skirt and sitting down in the shade.

“Here, make sure to take it slowly so you don’t choke,” she told them, tipping

the pitcher to fill each of their cups.

“Phew...”

“Hah...”

“I needed that.”

The three of them let out sounds of relief in turn, each downing their drinks in a single draft. The cold water of under ten degrees, only attainable in the inner palace, soothed their parched throats in the hot air.

“That was great! Seconds!” Faye exclaimed, thrusting her cup forward.

“Here you go,” Emilia answered with a smile, refilling it.

“May I have another cup too?” Dolores asked.

“I’d like another as well,” added Letti.

“Yes, yes, here you go. Make sure you don’t give yourselves stomachaches,” she told them, happily sitting in the greenery and playing the role of waitress to the young maids.

Before they knew it, the jug was empty, and its contents had even Letti recovering her smile. Of course, the three of them were sweating buckets due to drinking so much fluid after baking in the sun, so they were practically drenched.

Emilia glanced at their sweat-laden hair and now darker uniforms. “Once you’ve calmed down, go inside and eat. Make sure you wash and change your clothes first, though. Ines will scold you if you head in just like that,” she reminded them with a smile.

Bathing in the middle of their work and changing to clean their clothes might sound like a luxury beyond their station, but it was actually more of a responsibility than a privilege. While Zenjirou was open-minded about nearly all things, his focus on hygiene and cleanliness was rather abnormal by the general standards of Capua.

It wasn’t just limited to his own person either—the stench of sweat from the maids in the inner palace was something he disliked, and he disliked the perfumed oils all the more, so it led to even greater hassle.

Of course, he never said anything about it, and he did his best not to show his displeasure, but the maids around him were professionals. Spending as long as they did around him, they noticed his efforts to cover his feelings. As a result, every time the maids worked up a sweat, they would bathe and change into clean clothes.



After the trio’s afternoon of bathing, changing, eating, and napping, their work began anew once the sun started to set.

“This will do for the mowing. Now gather up the cuttings and dispose of them. Afterwards, water the grass. Understood?” Emilia instructed, her strictness returning like a switch had been thrown.

“Yes!”

“Yes.”

“Yesss.”

Faye, Dolores, and Letti answered her in turn, each using the same word but with their own characteristics. Faye’s response was energetic, while Dolores spoke in a calm, measured voice, and Letti let the syllable drag a little.

The personalities showing in each of their tones also showed in how they set about their work. While Faye raced off with a rake as tall as she was to collect the cuttings from the morning, Dolores fetched the cart and bags to move the grass, that being the easiest job.

“Uuhh...” On the other hand, Letti lagged behind a little as she looked around.

“What are you doing, Letti?” Emilia demanded. “If you have the time to stand around gawping, you have time to pick up a rake and gather the grass. And to think you call yourself a warrior’s daughter!”

“Oh, my apologies,” Letti answered the scolding, rushing off a little late.

Incidentally, the majority of noble families in Capua were those of warriors, but that didn’t mean that they *all* were. Letti’s family was one such exception, but there was no point in announcing that now. If she tried to tell Emilia, the response would probably be something like, “If you have time to make excuses,

you have time to work. And to think you call yourself a warrior's daughter!"

"Ah, handle the back, please, Letti."

"Yeah, got it."

Faye and Letti both set about raking the grass up. It was surprisingly tiring work, but Emilia was doing the same while watching them like a hawk, so slacking would have been suicide.

They had to put the right amount of force behind the rake to actually move the grass but also avoid digging it into the ground, so it worked up a sweat in mere moments.

It was then that Dolores returned with a cart carrying several large sacks. "I've got them. Let's clean up that mound," she said, picking up armfuls of the grass with gloved hands and stuffing them into the sacks. Once she had three full sacks, she put them on the cart. "I'll go get rid of this," she declared.

"Do it quickly," Emilia told her. "I expect you back soon."

"Right," Dolores answered shortly, taking the cart to a corner of the garden.

The cart was originally Zenjirou's and was something he'd brought for transporting the generator. It was great for moving heavy or bulky things, but the prince consort had little need for physical labor here, so he had allowed the maids to use it on a day-to-day basis.

This was well appreciated by the maids, who had to perform all the labor with women alone. It was so effective that Amanda had spoken to their merchant to look into the possibility of mass-production. The cart wasn't anything particularly complex, so even the local craftsman would be able to reproduce it.

After several trips with Dolores at its helm, the cart had moved all of the grass to the dump area, and the sun had truly started to set, bathing the area in the glow of twilight.

"Good work. Now to water the lawn. It will be harder once the sun has set, so let us hurry and finish it."

"Right!"

"Understood."

“All right.”

Faye showed no signs of tiring, Dolores made her exhaustion evident despite having taken the easiest job, and Letti’s recovery in the afternoon had completely faded away as the three of them answered with very different levels of energy.

The final job was to water the garden—a hard task that strained their tired bodies. After all, this world had no plumbing or hoses, or even watering cans. All they had were buckets filled with water and long-handled ladles. The single silver lining was that they could refill their buckets from the fountain in the middle of the garden, which at least meant that they didn’t need to walk long distances to a well.

“One, two, splash!” Faye yelled out.

“Hey! Faye! You’re getting me with that too!” Dolores complained, despite not really minding.

“Ah, sorry,” Faye apologized for her haphazard approach.

Despite the fact that it was evening, the air was still hot, and the water would soon dry. If anything, it was pleasant having the cold liquid on their bodies. There was a knack to getting a proper spread with the ladle, but the most important thing was arm strength.

“One, two, gooo,” Letti said, already reaching her limit. She was more spilling the water than actually spreading it.

“Letti, if you are tired, don’t rush. Instead, make sure you spread each swing as well as you can. Disgraceful! And to think you call yourself a warrior’s daughter...”

“Right, my apologies,” Letti answered, her arm visibly shaking as she held the full ladle, noticeable even from a distance.

While not to the same extent as Letti, Dolores was also reaching her limit. “I wonder if Sir Zenjirou has anything to make this easier...” she mumbled quietly.

However, while in “work mode,” Emilia didn’t let the comment pass. “Dolores, to think a warrior’s daughter would yearn for their master’s

possessions to make their job easier. Disgraceful.”

“Ah, yes, Miss Emilia, my apologies,” she answered, reflexively hunching her shoulders. The dimming light meant that she couldn’t see Emilia’s face, but the older woman’s expression as she scolded them was much more thoughtful than angry.

There was a real need for the maids to build up their strength and get better at their roles, but Emilia was aware that her own area of work placed an unusually heavy burden on the young maids. If some sort of tool could reduce their workload, it bore consideration.

I will have to ask Sir Zenjiro if he has such an item, she decided as she swung her own ladle, watering the grass.

“Good work,” she said eventually, once the gardens were shrouded in darkness. “That will be all for the day.”

In truth, it was simply too dark to work effectively rather than them being finished. The sun had set enough that it was difficult to even make each other out, let alone any expressions on each of their faces.

“Right, thank you.”

“It’s...finally...over...”

So it was only when Dolores and Letti’s replies answered her, that Emilia realized she was one short. There was a tall figure, and a big-chested figure, but no slight figure.

“Where is Faye?” she asked, pivoting around to look.

“Yes, Miss Emilia? What is it?” answered a hysterical voice.

Emilia turned to see a short figure. Only her silhouette was discernible, but she could tell that the figure—Faye—was carrying a heavy bucket in each hand. She must have been refilling them when Emilia had said they could stop. What poor timing!

The older woman’s strict work mode had come to an end with her earlier declaration, and she apologized with a pitying laugh. “I’m sorry, Faye; we’re done for the day,” she told her kindly.

“What?!” Faye yelled out unhappily after blinking blankly at her superior for a moment. “Then what about this water!”

“Sorry, but could you deal with it? If it’s too much trouble to take it back to the fountain, just scatter it around here.”

“Ugh...”

Even the stamina freak herself didn’t want to deal with that level of effort and dropped the buckets with a saddened cry.

“If you will excuse me. Make sure you clean up. Good night,” Emilia told them before vanishing into the darkness.

“Right...” Faye managed dazedly. Unwilling to take the buckets all the way back, she decided to just sprinkle them around the area.

As she came to that conclusion, Dolores spoke up with a laugh. “What a shame. Work hard.”

Faye could *see* the smile in her voice, despite the darkness. She stuck the ladle into the bucket and changed her plans, flinging the water at the tall figure instead.

“Oh, I will!” she yelled.

“Gah?!”

The darkness meant that she hadn’t been able to see, but the screech told her she had hit her mark and struck Dolores with the water.

“Oh, I *am* sorry. Did I splash you with it? It’s just so dark, I couldn’t tell,” she said affectedly, earning silence from Dolores in return.

Then: “Why, you—” Dolores yelled.

“Too slow!” was Faye’s answer as she side-stepped, bucket in one hand and ladle in the other.

Faye hadn’t been Dolores’s target, though. Dolores took the other bucket Faye had dropped, scooping some water from it and throwing it back at her roommate.

“Take that!”

“Whoa!”

“Agh?! Jeez, Dolores, that’s cold!” Letti complained, apparently having been caught in the crossfire.

“Oh, sorry, Letti,” Dolores apologized, stopping briefly to say it, and Faye didn’t overlook the opening.

“Got you!”

The water was less cold and more painful as it splashed against Dolores’s face.

“Why, you! You’ve got me mad now! Take that, and that!”

“Whoops, missed! Over here!”

The two of them began an energetic water fight as if their earlier tiredness had been nothing. Dark though the sky may have been, it was still hot. And although they were wearing their uniforms, the water wasn’t unpleasant.

“Come on, you two. If we don’t hurry and tidy up, Miss Emilia will be mad,” Letti said worriedly. She had been splashed several times but showed no sign of moving, proving the point.

“You’re right, so I’ll stake everything on this last strike!” Faye cried dramatically.

“I accept your challenge!” Dolores replied as the pair of them hefted their now half-empty buckets.

“Rargh!”

“Why, you!”

The shortest and tallest of the maids simultaneously let fly with the last of their water, right at each other’s faces.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

4

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**

Margarette

A blonde maid,
which is a rare
sight in Capua.





Though **Princess Bona** looked plain at a glance, her chestnut brown hair sparkled with silver dust in the light.

“Thank you for arranging such a wonderful welcome for the two of us.”

Prince Francesco had a sunny voice and expressive, fair features.

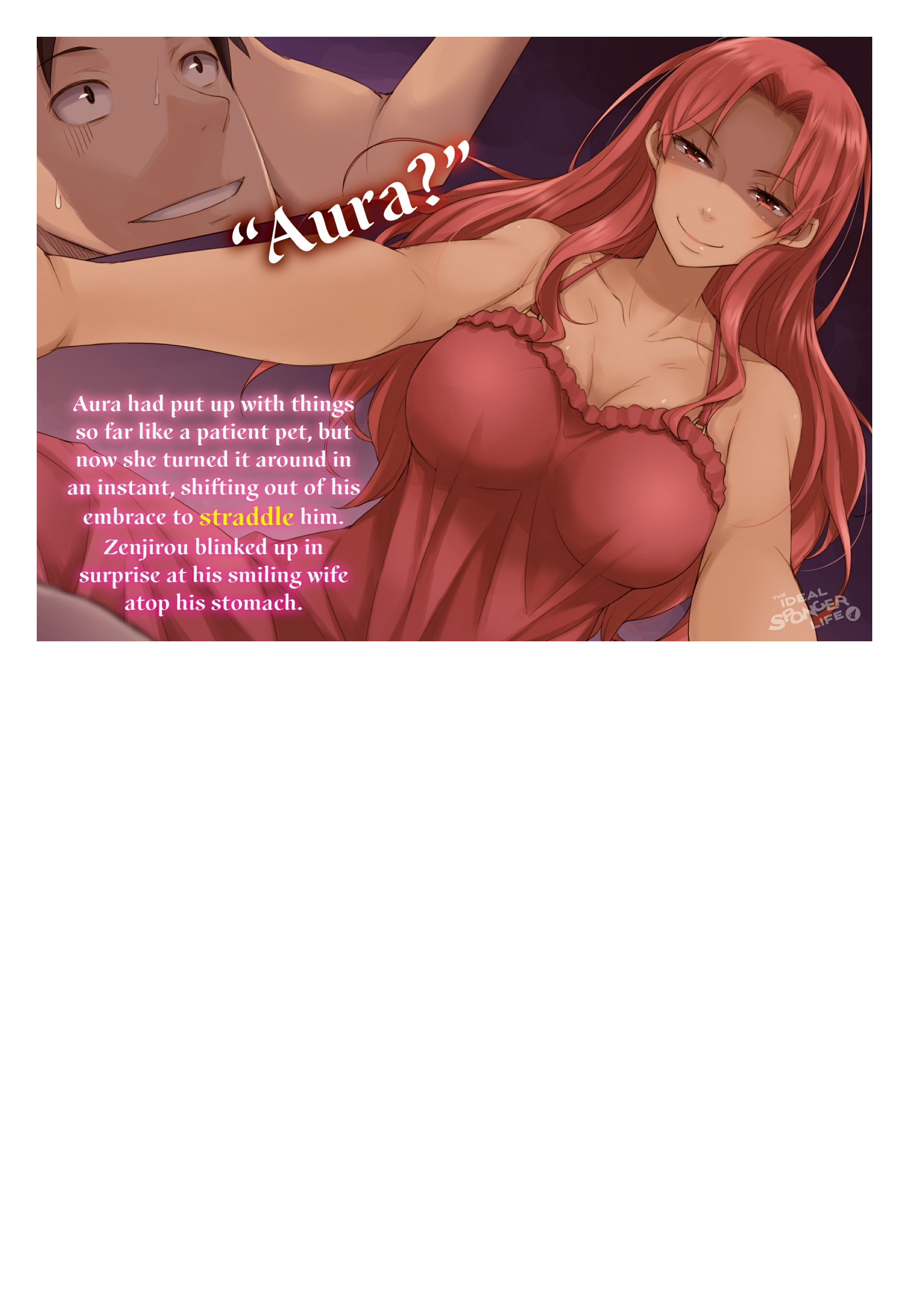


“Whoa...
so these are
the Drake
Marksmen...”

Still on their dash drakes,
the archers readied
their bows and fired at
General Pujol's command.
Dozens of arrows found
their marks in the
swarm of raptors.

“Fire!”

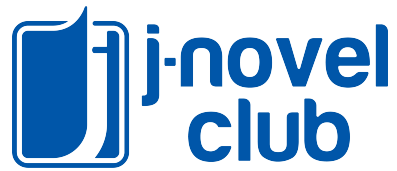
THE IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE



“Aura?”

Aura had put up with things so far like a patient pet, but now she turned it around in an instant, shifting out of his embrace to **straddle** him.

Zenjirou blinked up in surprise at his smiling wife atop his stomach.



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by Tsunehiko Watanabe

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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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